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# STRANGERS & PILGRIMS

Studies  
in Classics of Christian Devotion

BY WILLARD L. SPERRY  
*Dean of the Harvard Divinity School*



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*These all . . . confessed that they were strangers  
and pilgrims on the earth.* HEBREWS XI. 13



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*STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS*



## Introduction

*THE marks which Christianity has left on the life of the Western World during the last nineteen hundred years are many and plain. Until the time of Francis Bacon the natural sciences operated within the framework of its theology. It was only with the Age of the Enlightenment that philosophy ceased to pay tribute to theology, and became an independent intellectual enterprise. And not until the most recent days of Nietzsche, with his gospel of Anti-Christ, did men in any numbers venture a reasoned dissent from the Christian ethic. More especially our religion has been, down the centuries, the "mother of the arts." Its architecture, its paintings, its glass, and its music are among the most significant creations of the human spirit, and still furnish one of the traditional norms by which subsequent secular works of art are tested.*

*But the most precious of its bequests to us is its literature. Christianity, because of its Bible, was from the first a book religion and has always remained one of the world's learned faiths. The Biblical quality of our religion has been best perpetuated in its devotional literature, through which its indubitable saints speak to us about the life of the soul. We might describe these works in the single sentence which Cardinal Newman chose for his*

churchly coat of arms—*Cor ad cor loquitur*, “*Heart speaketh unto heart.*” You can learn much about Christianity from a few hours spent in Chartres Cathedral, studying its stone tracery and its windows; you will learn more by as many hours spent with Augustine’s *Confessions* or John Woolman’s *Journal*. An apostolic writer, in his extremity, anticipates our subsequent interest: “The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books.”

Church historians are accustomed to distinguish between a constant, personal piety which persists unchanged through the centuries, and the prodigal varieties of Christian theology. The books of our religion which record its systematic thought are spread before us like the rocks on the earth’s surface. We can distinguish the various strata which have been laid down through successive ages, and we can identify also an undifferentiated stratum underlying them all. Books of Christian theology—and most Christian books are theological—have been deposited as a stratified literature. They were, severally, the products of processes which can be localized in space and dated in time. They are none the less significant on that account, since they help us, in von Ranke’s words, to know how things came to be as they are. Such books, however, require on the part of those who are to profit by them a familiarity with

*the sequences of cause and effect which produced them. If we are to understand Aquinas, or Calvin, or Edwards, we must bring with us to the study of their writings a considerable historical apparatus.*

*The classics of Christian devotion, on the other hand, are the primal unstratified stuff of Christian letters. They are as nearly independent of history as books well can be. Their affinities are with mysticism, that is, with forms of the spiritual life for which time matters little or not at all. They partake of eternity and are the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. Our present secular culture may change out of all recognition in the next five hundred years, but any one of the books we are to consider will be as pertinent then as it is now. Here are the elemental and ever-renewed experiences of single men in their solitariness, or of small intimate communities, which are strangely uniform in every century. There is little formal theology in such books; there is, rather, an un-self-conscious attempt to give us a verbal transcript of the perennially renewed life of Christ in the soul of man. Such books are the occasion for theology, but are themselves the transcript of experiences which are prior to all theology. They are the life of which theology is the science.*

*These devotional works stand, therefore, alone. They do not require for their proper reading that we be theo-*

*logians, historians, philosophers. They call for a minimum of critical apparatus. Indeed, the attempt to interpret them in such terms will only blind us to their true nature. If we isolate them in time and place, and identify them too closely with their occasion or circumstance, we shall only misunderstand them. We had best bring to them, not our knowledge of church history or of systematic theology, but our personal experience of the Christian life. Their appeal is to our characters rather than to our learning. Though they are far beyond us in their religious maturity we can still profit by them, if we match them with whatever sincerity and simplicity we have achieved.*

*We shall be well advised, therefore, to read and to reread the books themselves, rather than to read other books about them. These chapters may seem a flagrant breach of such advice, yet I hope to keep reasonably clear of critical apparatus, and, as Wordsworth says, to work with an eye fixed steadily on the subject. Long familiarity with these classics, and constant rereading of them, finally persuades you that to know them you do not need to look around, you need only to look more intently at them and into them.*

*My former colleague, the late Professor James Hardy Ropes, once told a group of ministers that "there is nothing necessary to an understanding of the life of Jesus which*

*may not be had by anyone who will read the Gospel of Mark in the King James version, with open eyes."* His words are not as simple as they seem; the deceptiveness of their simplicity lies in the last three words, "*with open eyes.*" So there is nothing necessary to an understanding of any major work of Christian devotion which is not to be had by reading it with open eyes. In so far as the years open our eyes, we return to one or another of these classics to see in it some previously unnoticed truth or beauty, made patent to us by our own more mature experience of life.

*I shall attempt, therefore, to keep these brief books, one by one, steadily in sight. The barest account of the lives of their authors and the occasion of their writing will suffice. Indeed, in one instance the authorship is anonymous, in another composite, and in a third disputed; yet the worth remains unaffected by critical uncertainties. Nor shall I try to give you an abstract or outline of each book in turn. Presupposing an initial familiarity with them, I shall attempt, rather, to point out certain of their more striking qualities, which become apparent as one begins to know them well. We shall consider them, not as photographers posing a subject in the interests of literal precision, but as portrait painters trying to catch the dominant lines of a face, as being the truest index of a character.*





## CHAPTER I


*THE CONFESSIONS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE*

A CONVERSATION WITH HIS MOTHER CONCERNING THE  
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

*We were saying then: If to any one the tumult of the flesh were silenced, if the impressions of earth and water and air, and the poles too, were silenced, and the soul herself silent to herself, and by not thinking of self were to rise above self, if all dreams and imaginary revelations, every tongue, and every sign, and all that is transient, be silenced absolutely, since if any could hear, these all would say, "We made not ourselves, but He made us Who abideth for ever"; if these having spoken, now should be silenced, having rendered our ears more attentive to Him Who made them, and He alone should speak, not through them, but by Himself, that we may hear His Word, not by a tongue of flesh, nor by the voice of an Angel, nor by a sound from a cloud, nor by the darkness of a similitude, but might hear Himself Whom in these we love, might hear Himself without them—as we now strained ourselves, and with a bound of thought touched the eternal Wisdom Which remaineth over all;—could this last, and other visions of a far different kind be withdrawn, and this one ravish and absorb and envelop its beholder with inward joys, so that his life might be everlastingly like that one moment of understanding for which we now sighed, would not this be, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord"? And when shall this be? Shall it not be when "we all shall rise again, but shall not all be changed"? THE CONFESSIONS, BOOK IX: CHAPTER X*

## Chapter i

### THE CONFESSIONS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

UGUSTINE'S *Confessions* is a spiritual autobiography. William Wordsworth described his *Prelude* as a record of "the growth of a poet's mind." The *Confessions* might be similarly described as the history of a saint's mind. It came as a novelty into a world where there is said to be nothing new under the sun, and retains to this day its baffling originality.

Most authors at their work either use a body of traditional subject matter or follow an accepted literary pattern. If the pattern is novel, the material is familiar; if the substance is fresh, the form is traditional. Even the style of a rebel is conditioned by the conventions against which he is protesting and he becomes intelligible only against his background. Therefore the world's great books usually mark the marriage of a new subject to an old pattern, or an old theme to a new form.

With Augustine's *Confessions* it is otherwise: both the form and the content were new. There had been nothing like it in antiquity, since no man had ever thought of telling, in consecutive narrative, the story of his inner life. The one book among ancient classics to which the *Confessions* is most often and most appropriately compared is the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, but we have only to read that "Golden Book" to realize how marked the difference is. The *Meditations* are random moralizings, sustained by a patrician self-confidence which is wholly alien to the humility of the *Confessions*. After Au-

gustine, more than thirteen hundred years passed before the world saw another work similarly conceived. Rousseau's *Confessions* is the next autobiography to invite comparison with Augustine's original, yet a great gulf is fixed between the eighteenth-century humanist and the fifth-century saint. They gave their books the same title, but there the identity ends. For the first seventeen hundred years of our era, therefore, the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine stands quite alone, without a literary parallel.

Within the last century and a half, however, the situation has changed. The Romantic Movement made men inordinately interested in the processes of their own minds, and the science of psychology has now given to us, their successors, an apparatus for understanding those processes. The psychological novel and the spiritual autobiography have become platitudes in modern letters. On the slightest provocation, any contemporary writer will give you a meticulous account of the course of his meandering stream of consciousness. The pattern of the *Confessions*, once unique, has now become an accepted literary convention. Recent works after this kind differ from their ancient predecessor only in their treatment of the theme. Their authors celebrate thoughts and deeds which Augustine reprobated, and substitute exhibitionism for self-criticism. Nevertheless, contemporary interest in books subjectively conceived has domesticated Augustine's autobiography in our minds as a work which is near to us rather than far from us. As a matter of dates it is much the earliest of the books we shall consider. Yet the *Little Flowers* and the *Imitation of Christ*, which were

written centuries later, seem by comparison archaic and remote.

The first quality of the *Confessions* which we identify is, therefore, its striking modernity. Much of it, in spite of its formal theological vocabulary, might have been written yesterday. If we try to identify the sources of this suggestion of modernity we shall find that they derive from Augustine's almost uncanny precision as a psychologist before psychology was. The foundation of all science is accurate observation and to this axiom psychology offers no exception. Few men have had either the power or the courage to turn upon their own thoughts and feelings that clear candor with which Augustine first observed and later remembered what went on in his mind and heart. His clinical accuracy has made him treasure-trove both for those to whom normal psychology is a pass-key to the understanding of religion and for those to whom religion is the classical instance of one or another of our mental abnormalities.

The *Confessions* abounds with psychological insights; two or three examples must suffice us. Augustine as a young man was inordinately fond of the theatre, and of Greek tragedies in particular.

Why is it that man likes to taste an unnecessary sorrow, by beholding distressing and tragical events which he would not wish to happen to himself? And yet as a spectator he wills to be touched with sorrow for them, and this sorrow is his pleasure. III: II

We think, to-day, that we are beginning to understand the nature of his perplexity; yet it still remains a real, not a rhetorical question. Or again, read his descrip-

tion of the first great sorrow of his life, the loss of the dearest friend of his youth:

To Thee, I know, O Lord, I should have lifted it [that is, his mind] up, for Thee to give it relief; but I neither had the will nor the power to do so, and the difficulty was the greater, because when I thought of Thee, nothing real and substantial presented itself to my mind. For it was not Thou, but an empty phantasm, and my own error which was my god. If I tried to cast my burden upon it, that my soul might rest, there was no solid support, but it fell as through an empty space, back upon me; and I remained to myself as a luckless place, where I could neither stay nor get away. For whither could my heart flee from my heart? whither could I flee from myself? whither should I not follow myself? iv: vii

And one further quotation; this time from the record of the final struggle before his capitulation to Christianity. This might be Pierre Janet speaking, or William James:

The mind commands the body, and it instantly obeys; the mind commands the mind, and is resisted. The mind commands the hand to be moved, and is so readily obeyed that the command is scarcely distinguishable from the execution; yet the mind is mind, and the hand is body. The mind commands the will, that is, its own self, yet it does not obey. Whence this monstrous conduct? And why? It commands, I say, to will something which it would not command to do, unless it had already willed; yet that is not done which it commands. viii: ix

The theme of the *Confessions* is announced in the familiar sentence in the opening chapter, "*Domine, fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*"—"O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." The sentence

which follows goes on to say, "Grant me, O Lord, to know and to understand." The sequence of thought suggests that the word *cor*, commonly translated "heart," should have here another meaning current at the time, "intelligence." The *Confessions* is shot through with feeling, but it is not a treatise on the religious emotions; it is the history of a mind. Its theme is, therefore, the simple statement, "O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our minds are restless until they find rest in Thee."

The occasion of the book was a dual one. In the table talk of his maturer years Augustine had apparently been in the habit of making casual references to his earlier life. Eventually his friends urged him to tell them the story in full, and the *Confessions* was his response to that request. Furthermore, he was concerned to silence once for all the ugly rumors about his pre-Christian life with which opponents were vilifying his good name as a Christian. In the latter respect the origin of the *Confessions* was not unlike that of Newman's *Apologia*. Both men were the victims of critics who were "poisoning the wells"; each was warranted in trying to defend his good name.

What of Augustine's life? He was born in Tagaste, one of the lesser Numidian cities of North Africa, in the year 354, the son of a devout Christian mother and a worldly father. His mother was by far the stronger character: the father is seldom mentioned and disappears early from the scene; he died when Augustine was still in his teens. His parents were ambitious for him and his talents seem to have warranted the sacrifices which they made to fit him for the profession of a rhetorician. His educa-

tion took him by stages to Carthage and thence to Italy as a teacher of rhetoric, first to Rome and subsequently to Milan. What is commonly called his conversion took place at Milan in the late summer of 386, when he was thirty-two years old. Following the death of his mother in 388 at the Roman port of Ostia, he went back to Africa and in 396, after six or eight years of seclusion, was made bishop of Hippo. The stormy years of his episcopate involved him in two theological controversies of the first magnitude, one with the Donatists and the other with Pelagius, as well as in unremitting moral struggle with a paganism which was "some time a-dying" and was dying hard. He came to his life's end in the year 430, at the age of seventy-five, while Hippo was being besieged by the Vandals.

The *Confessions* was written in the year 397, when Augustine was forty-three years old, eleven years after his conversion and only a year or two after his elevation to the episcopate. The book had, as we have seen, its human occasion and contemplated its human public, but we shall misread it if we think of it as a work written to men. It is primarily a dramatic monologue addressed to God. The fact that men might read it is incidental to its original intention and its true nature. A book written to God will be differently conceived and executed from a book written for men. All the ordinary counsels of prudence, the discreet devices of half-told truths, will be beside the mark, since the divine partner in the transaction is one "unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid."

The *Confessions* must be read, therefore, with this prem-



ise and principle of interpretation in mind. It is compounded of facts from Augustine's pre-Christian past, recorded with the utmost candor, and of judgments which Almighty God may be supposed to pass upon those facts. I know of no book in which it is more necessary to distinguish between the original happenings and the ultimate verdict passed upon them. The *Confessions* as a whole is like a picture gallery, hung with colorful sketches of a man's childhood and youth, uniformly framed in a heavy black moulding of mature condemnation. The frames are so disproportionately deep and sombre that they all but obliterate the pictures which they enclose. To understand Augustine as a boy and a young man, we must take the sketches out of their framework and study them by themselves.

From the standpoint of a mature saintliness Augustine was, of course, right. In the eyes of God there can be no distinction between little sins and great sins. The stuff of evil deeds is uniform and terribly sinister. It is the quality and the connotation of the act, rather than its dimensions, which God abhors, and which, by inference, the Christian should condemn in himself. Varying shades of gray must be given the full value of that final blackness which they foretell. Augustine, in describing his youthful vagaries, is not writing of ethics as an empirical science, or dealing with the moral relativity which we discern in the mixed motives prompting most human acts; he is praying to God. The very word "confession" carries with it the idea of praise to God for his work of grace. Therefore, whether he is describing his infant greed in groping for his mother's breast, his

truancy at school, or his academic ambitions and honors, all alike come under common condemnation as belonging to that world of selfishness, folly, and futility which, after his conversion, he put behind him. We must do him the justice of believing that he wrote in deadly seriousness. He is not telling us these things because they are what a bishop is expected to say; he is saying them because, before God, he believes them to be true.

But when you have finally succeeded in turning your eyes from the black framework of condemnation to the innocent recollection of the original event, you meet a man whom you instantly recognize as a fellow creature. Augustine understood and invoked that spacious saying of Terence, "I am a man, I count nothing human foreign to myself." He was not ashamed to remain to the last "human-all-too-human," and his conversion did not cure him of his humanness. He tells us, towards the end of the *Confessions*, that even while his mind was moving into the infinite and divine mystery, he could still be diverted by the sight of a dog chasing a hare, or could fall to daydreaming watching a spider catching flies in its web. Precisely because he was so truthful he was unable to distort in retrospect his remembrance of things past.

Has any humanist ever written more gracious words than these?

I was launched deeper and deeper into the stormy sea of human society. . . . Even then, I existed, I lived, I felt; I had entrusted to me a completeness of being. . . . Life itself has its own charm, through a certain intrinsic comeliness. I: VIII, I: XX, II: V

Yet that last sentence stands ten lines from the statement that at the very time of which he is speaking he was sunk in a "bottomless pit" of iniquity.

We are reassured to find that as a schoolboy Augustine was neither an infant prodigy nor a paragon. "One and one are two, and two and two are four were an odious sing-song." He "hated" Greek and his incompetence at it gave "a flavour of gall" to any tale in that tongue. As a child he was told to obey his teachers, but his indifferent success at this elemental duty laid him open to repeated punishment. He prayed God that he might not be whipped, and the whippings he received in spite of his requests created for him his first problem of prayer. If, however, looking back, he did not think well of himself as a schoolboy, he thought no better of his elders:

I used to ask Thee, though but a little boy yet with no little earnestness, that I might not be whipped at school. And when Thou didst not hear me, which was not "for no purpose," my stripes, at that time a great and heavy trouble to me, were made a subject of laughter by my elders, and even by my parents, who yet wished me no ill.

But the trifles with which older persons are occupied are called business, but when boys occupy themselves with that which in their case corresponds with those trifles, they are punished by those elders; and no one pities either boys or men. For will any one of sound judgment approve of my being beaten, because as a boy, through playing at ball, I made less progress in those studies which would only render me, when a man, capable of playing at a worse game. I: IX

It is generally assumed that from his sixteenth year

until the time of his conversion, a period of some fifteen years, Augustine lived a life of unbridled passion. Perhaps the *Confessions* warrants this inference. With the coming of his adolescence we read of "dense vapors arising from the miry lusts of the flesh" enveloping him in "a thick mist of sensuality." Swept ahead of the flood of his desires he was "carried away over the precipices of passion, and lost in a whirlpool of disgrace," where he was "tossed about and poured out, and flowed away and boiled over through fornications." Augustine never spared words in savage condemnation of the sin of concupiscence and, taking him at his word, critics—even the kindest critics—have been wont to appraise his early years at his own later valuation.

Much has been made of his hot African blood and his semitropical environment. The pornographer will find rewarding source material in so much of the *City of God* as Augustine devotes to the degenerate morals of the cities of men at the end of the fourth century. Whether the Carthage of his day was a more corrupt place than New York or London or Paris in our day is, I should suppose, an open question. One suspects that the sly innuendoes of modern vice are probably worse than the businesslike realism of sexual immorality in the ancient world. It is hard, in such matters, to compare men and cultures in widely separated epochs.

Personally I am inclined to believe that in this particular respect Augustine framed his picture so black that we are in danger of losing sight of its many redeeming lights. If he was a man of hot passions, he was also a man of warm affections, and indulgence of his sexual

desires never went so far as to destroy a capacity for genuine affection. A pure devotion to a Christian mother remained unimpaired by whatever may have been the impurities of his young manhood, and this single fact leads us to suspect an element of exaggeration in the account of his youthful immoralities. It is true that very early he took a mistress, but monogamous concubinage was generally accepted at the time, even by the Church, and the woman may well have been someone whom he could not legally marry. His nameless mistress remained faithful to him for many years and bore him a son whom he called Adeodatus, "gift of God"—an unlikely name for a child of whom his conscience could not approve. With a view to formal marriage he eventually dismissed her and she wakens our pity as she passes silently and loyally from the picture. The proposed marriage never took place, and a year or so later his conversion put marrying and giving in marriage beyond the horizons of his concern.

Given the customs of the time, I do not get the impression of a man who was inordinately sensual. Where the lusts of the flesh were concerned Augustine as a youth was not always his own master, but even in his pre-Christian days he felt this want of self-control to be a moral weakness. If in this respect he compared unfavorably with many Christians, so he must have realized that he compared unfavorably with many a Stoic. On the credit side of the ledger we should enter these considerations: he preserved through all the sixteen years of "miry lusting" and "boiling fornication" an uncorrupted capacity for wholesome friendship, an unspoiled

love for his mother, an independent life of the mind, a capacity for hard work, and beyond all this a perpetually uneasy conscience. Had he been, in literal fact, the suddenly sensual youth whom he describes in retrospect, we may doubt whether he would have come through as unscathed as he did. We seem to see him, in this elemental matter, like a ship clawing off a lee shore into the teeth of a gale, always holding his own, and even making headway to windward. He never suffered final and fatal shipwreck on the rocks of his own passions. Charity, and a sense of perspective, while not clearing him of all the charges which he brings against himself, suggest both a cleaner and a stronger figure than, in this respect, he has painted in his book of remembrance.

If we turn to another statement of the dark problem of Augustine's youthful sins, less sensational than those of the flesh, we shall get a better ethical perspective for our reading of the *Confessions*. Nearly seven chapters of Book II are devoted to the famous incident of the stolen pears. As a mere matter of space Augustine has more to say about this single escapade than about all his "miry and boiling concupiscence." When he was a boy he went out one night with a crowd of companions and robbed a pear tree in a neighbor's orchard. Let anyone who in his boyhood never stole fruit cast the first stone. Yet Augustine remembered with particular horror an incident which most of us would have long forgotten from our idle childhood. He devotes page after page to a discussion of the motives which prompted the act and its awful implications.

The pears he stole were not so good as those he had in his own garden, therefore he was not prompted to go raiding for better pears than were to be had nearer at hand. It was not that he wanted to eat the pears, for he tells us that after he had taken one bite from each he threw it away. He realized at the time, as he remembered on looking back, that left to himself he would not have done the thing alone. The gang spirit ran away with him. The only construction he could place on his act was this, that he deliberately did it because he knew it was wrong; he had a wanton joy in the act of stealing. The taste of those pears gave him the very flavor of the primal apple in the Garden of Eden; here was the forbidden fruit, and man's first disobedience. The way opened straight from that orchard down to hell:

What then was it which I, poor wretch, loved in thee, O theft of mine, O wicked deed of mine, that night, in my sixteenth year? Thou wert not beautiful because thou wert a theft; or art thou anything at all, that thus I should address thee? Beautiful were those pears which we stole, for they were made by Thee, Thou most beautiful of all, Creator of all, Thou good God, God, my sovereign good and my true good. Those pears were beautiful, but it was not for them my wretched soul craved; I had plenty of better, but those I took only for the sake of stealing. For having gathered them, I threw them away, feasting only on the lusciousness of the sin, which I enjoyed. For if I did taste some of them, it was the sin which gave them a sweet flavour. Those pears . . . O depth of this bottomless pit . . . O corruption, O monster of life and depth of death. Is it possible that I liked to do what I might not, simply and for no

other reason than because I might not . . . ? O incomprehensible seduction of the mind. II: VI, IX

We are accustomed to tell one another that God may be discerned in the simplest and humblest happenings of daily life. If this be so, it must be equally true that the Prince of Darkness may be identified in acts quite as trivial, but ominously sinister in their connotation. The memory of that orchard and its bitter fruit lived with Augustine as an experience of the Kingdom of Evil, which he entered with conscious uneasiness and from which forever after he recoiled in reflective horror. The story of the stolen pears gives us, as nothing else in the *Confessions*, the ethical perspective by which we must appraise Augustine's mature self-chastisement. If you can recall such an act in your own past, or create it in imagination, and then reflect upon its intimations, you will be able to relate the original youthful experience to the ultimate moral verdict which Augustine finally passed upon it.

The *Confessions*, however, is not without its more reassuring entries. Not all of the sources which go to the making of our mature religion wear at first the label of conventional theology. Augustine, the Christian bishop, was wont to disparage the concerns of his youth and early manhood; yet they all contributed directly to the conscious Christian he finally became, and we cannot ignore the prophetic worth of interests which in retrospect he chose to deplore. Without the experiences and the discipline of those years he never would have become the man he was.

There was his mother. He never forgot that from the



first she had hoped and prayed that he might become a Christian. He attributed his conversion to her prayers. Yet, in spite of modern psychoanalytic biography, he was not bound to her by any perverse affection. The picture we have of Monica is that of a doting woman, fussing too constantly and therefore rather ineffectually over an only son. Augustine never ceased to respect and to love his mother, but as a lad and a young man he went his independent way and had for years a serious life of his own which she could neither understand nor share. Monica is not the only woman in Christian history who has fretted over her son's absorption in godless philosophies, or has deplored their peril to his soul. Yet there she always was, a silent rebuke and a silent summons—and the mere fact of her being there, the woman she was, worked its steady effect upon him.

There was a book which mattered greatly to him—a treatise of Cicero's called the *Hortensius*, now lost save for fragments preserved in other works. He was nineteen when he read it, and the reading of it marked a milestone in his life. It was not Cicero's style that attracted him, but the theme of the work—its praise of the love of wisdom. "I was stirred, inflamed, and filled with desire not for this or that sect, but to love, seek, gain, lay hold of, and embrace wisdom itself, whatever that might be." He is not the first man nor will he be the last to look back to some one single book which has marked the beginning of a new period in the inner life.

Augustine had a genius for friendship. Unlike most mystics he was seldom alone. After his conversion he retired for a time from the world, yet not into solitude.

We find him most often at the centre of a little group of congenial companions. Even in the most critical hours of his life there was always a friend at his side or ready at hand in the immediate background. Has friendship ever had a more gracious tribute than in these lines?

To talk and laugh together; to do each other kindnesses; to read together books which accorded with our taste; to be playful together, and to be dignified in turn; to differ at times without discord, as if a man differed with himself, and by the very rare instances of differing to give a flavour to our habitual harmony of thought; to teach one another and to learn, by turns; to long impatiently for those absent, and to welcome joyfully their return:—these, and similar expressions of natural love, escaping from the heart through the features, the tongue, the eyes, and a thousand pleasing ways, were as so much fuel melting our souls, and out of many making one.

IV: VIII

To Ambrose of Milan he owed more than to any other of his teachers, yet he tells us with simple candor, "I began to love him at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth, which I had no hope of finding in the Church, but as a person who was kind to myself." He seems to have had an innate distrust of solitude and a confidence both in the leaven of companionship and in the moral fortification which may be had from an intimate human society. The man who said that religion is spread by "one loving heart which kindles another" was also the man who with utter simplicity describes our daily life as "that most sweet and precious habit of living together."

But more important than all else for an understanding

of Augustine we must reckon with his passion for the world of ideas. He had a genuine intellectual curiosity and an inner compulsion to speculate.

It is a little difficult to find in our day the precise cultural parallel to Augustine. He was by profession a rhetorician. The "rhetor" was the man in the classical world who was charged with what we now know as secondary education. He was usually the master of a public school supported by the community, or of a private school of his own organizing. If his pupils wished further and higher education they passed from him, as rhetorician, to the philosopher. He probably added to his teaching duties occasional public lectures.

There are some men whom nature intends to be headmasters of secondary schools; it seems doubtful whether Augustine was such a man. We seem to get the suggestion that he regarded schoolmastering as beneath his academic powers and his professional deserts. When he became a Christian, he gave up his position as rhetorician without regret, and took the greatest pleasure in giving "notice to the people of Milan to provide their scholars with another vendor of words." There is about him a hint of the type which to-day we identify as "the intellectual": he seems to have had in his earlier years the making of an academic snob, if not a poseur.

Yet, in retrospect, he is not fair to the years he spent on the classics, nor does he seem to recognize how deeply that discipline marked his methods of thought and his written style. He could not delete from his Christian writings this pre-Christian influence which he professed to deplore. His condemnation of the classics is said to

have done more than any other one thing to start the wave of anti-intellectualism which swept over Christendom after his time. Nevertheless Augustine's life, as a Christian thinker and writer, was not a negation of his prior history. He merely turned to the account of Christianity a skill which he had previously used for other ends. His conversion gave point and direction to a passion for the things of the mind which had consumed him since boyhood.

This is not the place to enlarge upon the systems of philosophy with which Augustine successively identified himself. Whatever was being thought and said by the philosophers and moralists of his day he knew and had tried. He turned for a time to Manichæism, and later to Neoplatonism. The one important thing to notice in the record of his early speculations is his increasing preoccupation with the problem of evil. He had instinctively fastened on this most difficult of all the questions with which philosophy, ethics, and religion are concerned, and his genuine intellectual perplexity must have been given personal poignancy by an uneasy conscience at his own want of self-mastery. The cosmic question came home to him as a private humiliation, with the disquieting knowledge that in moral matters he was not his own man. Why are we like that? What is the answer?

Augustine's conversion was the last stage in a long process of the wearing down of years of moral resistance to Christianity. We must always remember that by the time he was a grown man Christianity had been reaffirmed as the official religion of the empire. Before

Augustine became a man, Julian the Apostate had come and gone. Paganism, though still a dominant cultural fact, was in its decline and on the defensive. There was no question of political disabilities to be incurred by embracing Christianity—the situation was indeed quite the contrary; there was hardly a suggestion of social inferiority attaching to church membership, much less any prospect of the persecutions which had menaced and martyred Christians until a half century before his time. Augustine was an academic man of the world who fought off the suggestion that he needed religion as Christianity construed it, and felt warranted in so doing because, as a body of philosophic thought, the Christian religion seemed inferior to the non-Christian systems with which he was familiar. He tells us that in his pagan days he despised the Bible as being, from a literary standpoint, poor stuff compared to the classics.

Nevertheless the religion of Christ was always near him in the person of his mother; his mistress was probably a Christian; he lived constantly on the edges of the Church and many of his friends belonged to it. Altogether we have a type with which we are not unfamiliar—a man who for years postponed and fended off a decision which from the first he knew to be inevitable. His conversion marked the moment when, owing to the steady erosion of Christian influences beneath the surface of his life, his centre of gravity was changed. In a soliloquy to God he says of the closing years of his pre-Christian life, “I was becoming more miserable, and Thou nearer.” The story is familiar, but can never lose its poignant beauty:

There was a little garden to our lodging, of which, as of the whole house, we had the use; for our host, the landlord, did not live there. Thither my agitated heart bore me, where no one might interrupt the hot conflict which I was warring with myself, until it ended in that which Thou knewest, but I did not; I only knew that I was healthily beside myself, and dying, in order to live—knowing how evil I was, and not knowing what good thing I should shortly become. I retired then into the garden, and Alypius followed close after me. But I did not feel my privacy invaded by his presence; or how could he have left me alone in such a state? We sat down, as far as possible away from the house. I groaned in spirit, indignant with myself with a violent indignation, that I entered not into Thy Will and Covenant, my God, into which “all my bones cried out” unto me to enter, and extolled it to the skies: and we do not enter into it by means of ships, or coaches, or feet; neither had we to go so far as I had come from the house to the place where we were sitting. For not only to go, but also to arrive thither, nothing more was required than to will to go, but to will firmly and undividedly; not to turn and toss this way and that, a will half-wounded, struggling, rising in one part with another part falling.

I cast myself down under a certain fig-tree I know not how, and gave full vent to my tears, and floods broke forth from mine eyes, “an acceptable sacrifice to Thee.” And, not indeed in these words, but to the same effect, I spake much to Thee: “And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord, wilt Thou be angry for ever?” “O remember not our former iniquities,” for I felt that I was bound by them. I ejaculated thus sadly—“How long?” how long, “to-morrow and to-morrow”? Why not at once? why not at this very hour end my foulness? VIII: VIII, XII

Psychology, without denying the grace of God oper-

ating in the transaction, can give a naturalistic account of that final moment in the garden at Milan, when in utter moral misery and self-loathing he heard a child's voice over the wall saying, "Take, read; take read"—and picked up a Bible lying at hand and read where his eye first fell:

"Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantoning, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its lusts." I would read no further, nor was there any need for me to do so; for instantly, when I had finished the sentence, by a serene light as it were infused into my heart, all the clouds of doubt were dispersed. VIII: XII

In Newman's *Apologia* there is at the beginning of Chapter V—"Position of My Mind since 1845"—a sentence which says: "From the time that I became a Catholic, of course I have no further history of my religious opinions to narrate." Newman goes on to say that he does not mean that he stopped thinking, but that he had no anxiety of mind and heart. Newman lived at a time when Catholic doctrine had been formulated. Augustine lived at a time when it was in the making. Yet I cannot conceive that Augustine would ever have said, under any circumstances, that after his conversion there was no further history of his religious opinions to narrate. To the last his was a mind "voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone."

It is much the fashion to-day to complain of the prominence we give to the problematical side of religion, which presents itself to the modern mind as a question

mark rather than an exclamation point, something to be answered rather than affirmed. It is said that our habit of approaching religion by way of questions puts us at the outset in a wrong relation to it, since it is not religion which puts the question, but life; religion being the answer.

We twentieth-century questioners are reassured to find that Saint Augustine's *Confessions* is, structurally, more nearly like a series of questions than like anything else. There are pages of the *Confessions* where the question mark ends nearly every sentence. Possibly we have here a survival of the dialectic method—the question and answer pattern. In any case the bulk of the questions with which the pages of the *Confessions* are burdened are not rhetorical; the answer is not implied in the form of the asking. They are real questions to which Augustine does not know the answer. He was not a victim of the cheap supposition that religion answers all the questions which man can ask. Nor was he afraid to go on with the religious life aware of a host of still unanswered questions. He knew that, even for the Christian, life is environed by mystery, and his questions are a glad recognition of that fact, rather than an impatient rebellion against it. The mood and literary manner of the *Confessions* suggest the title which Dr. George A. Gordon gave to one of his final volumes of sermons, *Aspects of the Infinite Mystery*:

How shall I call upon my God? What room is there in me, where my God may come to me? Why do I ask Thee to come to me, unless Thou wert already in me? Whither then do I call Thee, when I am in Thee? Do heaven and



earth contain Thee since Thou fillest them, or, dost Thou fill them, without exhausting Thyself, since they do not contain Thee? Art Thou wholly everywhere and does nothing contain Thee wholly? 1: 11

Like Newman, Augustine was without anxiety as a Christian, but unlike Newman his mind continued to range beyond the borders of formulated belief. The riddle of the universe was still his mental homeland, and though he had found for himself a sufficient way of life he did not profess to have read the riddle fully or to have plucked the heart out of the mystery. In his company any man may be reassured that, while rhetorical questions are in religion an impertinence, persistent intellectual perplexities may live in closest company with faith, and are not incompatible with the Christian life. Indeed Augustine might encourage us to say, as certain philosophers had said of their inquiries, that religion is not so much the answer to questions as the discovery of what life's real questions are. It was Augustine's distinction that life taught him to ask the type of question which matters above all others, and with the *Confessions* before us we need not fear to ask God questions to which he still withholds the answers.

A final quality of the book calls for comment. The *Confessions* is a book which to this day radiates a strange energy. You will remember that, in his *Education*, Henry Adams compared the "dynamo and the virgin"—a comparison which later found form in a characteristic and baffling poem. He said, and said rightly, that it was the generative power of both the woman and the machine which makes them, in quite diverse ways, not dissimilar

symbols of religion. We read theological books which are lifeless; we read religious books and are aware that some mental process is going on in them which generates energy. We can, I think, discern what that process is; it is a placing of opposite ideas in such close juxtaposition that their interaction in the mind breeds emotional excitement and stirs the imagination. Any half-truth left to itself soon loses its interest and vitality. Bring it into the presence of its complementary half-truth and it comes instantly to life. The verbal pattern of this antithesis of ideas is known as the paradox. The paradox is easy to manufacture, and open to constant abuse as an evasion of thought, yet like all powerful things in life its abuses do not invalidate its truth and worth.

Now religion is an experience in which the final antitheses of things are brought together and left standing. They are never permanently resolved, though the tension between them is from time to time temporarily relaxed in moments of mystical peace. Meanwhile the mere bracketing of two such initially irreconcilable ideas—ideas of the first magnitude—in a single sentence has on the mind the exciting effect which an electric current has on the body. You feel as though you were drawing near the power which makes the world go round, and breathing its ozone.

If the question mark is the conventional punctuation of the *Confessions*, the paradox is its equally conventional sentence form. The two facts are, perhaps, interdependent, since every paradox states by implication a stubborn question. Take the sentence which we have already cited, that with which the *Confessions* opens: "O

God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." It is one of the most moving and truthful sayings in the whole range of religious writing. Our troubled human nature is brought into the presence of the God of peace and left there. We are not told how the human and the divine are to be reconciled, yet we are told that they belong together and not apart, and this fact, in spite of all residual difficulties, we believe to be so.

This sentence pattern runs through the entire book and gives to it an electric quality which we intuitively sense, though we may not identify its source. It may well be that at their lower level Augustine is simply perpetuating in his paradoxes a habit of antithetical statement which he had perfected as a rhetorician during his days as a classical scholar. Many of his paradoxes are neat, and once heard seem inevitable, but they are never merely pretty. There is always a touch of poignant truthfulness about them. "I know not whence I came into this, I cannot tell whether to call it dying life or living death." "We are ashamed not to be shameless." "Whence is this sweet fruit gathered from life's bitterness?" "Men love the truth when it manifests itself; when it manifests them, they hate it." "Sorrowful joys contend with joyous sorrows; and which will conquer, I know not." "I find joy in the remembrance of a past sorrow, and sorrow in the remembrance of a past joy." Or consider the majestic meditation upon the nature of God:

What art Thou then, my God? what, I ask, but the Lord God? "For who is Lord but the Lord? or who is God save our God?" O most High, most Good, most

Powerful, most Omnipotent, most Merciful and most Just, most Hidden and most Present, most Beautiful and most Strong, Stable yet Incomprehensible; changeless Thyself, yet changing all things; never old, never new; making all things new, and "making old the proud, and they know it not"; ever working, ever at rest; gathering, and not needing; upholding, and filling, and overshadowing; creating and nourishing and perfecting; seeking, yet never lacking anything. Thou lovest, without passion; Thou art jealous, without alarm; Thou repentest, without sorrow; Thou art angry, without emotion; Thou changest Thy works, without ever altering Thy design; Thou receivest back what Thou findest, without ever having lost; Thou art never poor, yet rejoicing in gains; never avaricious, yet exacting usury; Thou receivest over and above, that Thou mayest be indebted, and yet—who has anything which is not already Thine own? Thou payest debts, owing nothing; Thou forgivest debts, losing nothing. And what is all that has been said, my God, my life, my sweet and holy joy? or what can any say, when one speaks of Thee? And woe to those who are silent about Thee; since but dumb are even those who speak much. I: IV

It is not beyond the wit of a skilled writer to manufacture such sentences. Yet they are saved from the charge of being literary pleasantries by the more powerful uses of the same pattern in passages which no *littérateur* could have fabricated in a study. Only a religious man, who felt all that the words imply, could have written those two matchless sentences in the chapter dealing with human sorrow. "Blessed is he who loves Thee, and his friend in Thee, and his enemy for Thee. For he alone loses no one dear to him, to whom all are dear in Him who never can be lost."

If you study a sentence like that you find that it is a verbal square knot made up of two contrasted ideas, the friends whom we must lose and the God whom we cannot lose, laid across each other and tied together into an indissoluble whole. The twist of mind by which such antithetical ideas are turned into a square knot which will not slip, rather than a double half-hitch which will slip, is one of the marks of the thought of a truly religious man. A fanatic, or a religiously superficial man, habitually ties a sentence that will slip, and when the component ideas pull apart all that remains is a residual tangle in the one or the other of them. Augustine's sentences have never pulled apart; and the more we meditate on them the tighter the knot which he first made is drawn.

Curiously enough Augustine in the *Confessions* has little to say of Christ. Other Christian writers have used the doctrines of the divine and the human natures in Christ as the classical square knot in Christian thought. Blaise Pascal in his *Thoughts* states the paradox of conventional Christology with characteristic boldness. The *Confessions*, however, while accepting the person and work of Christ and making decent reference to these themes, is curiously silent on the matter. If the *Confessions* be a faithful transcript of Augustine's inner life, one is driven to the conclusion that, while the person of Christ became domesticated within his formal thought, his soul never came to what we might call that point of evangelical arrest. It was toward God the Infinite Mystery that Augustine had been groping for years; it was to God the Father, no less infinite or mysterious because of his

fatherhood, that he finally came. "I am," he says quite simply, "but a little child, but my Father ever liveth and is sufficient for me. . . . Thou Thyself art all my good; Thou, Almighty, who art with me, yes before I was with Thee." Since these things are so, he can but pray in another of those tightly knotted sentences, "Give what Thou orderest; and order what Thou wilt," awaiting the time when all shall be made clear, for "here I can be, but do not will to be; there I will to be, but cannot be."

He began the *Confessions* doubtful whether he could achieve anything:

The race is curious to know the lives of others, backward to correct their own. Why seek they to hear what I am, from myself, who will not hear what they themselves are, from Thee? x: iii

He ends the *Confessions* doubtful whether he had achieved anything:

This is the fruit of my confessions, not of what I was, but of what I am, to confess this not only in thy presence with a secret "exultation with trembling"; but in the ears also of the believing sons of men, the companions of my joy and the sharers of mortality, my fellow-citizens and fellow pilgrims,—those who were before me, shall be after me, and are with me,—on the road of life. . . . They want therefore to hear me confessing something of my inner life, where neither eye, nor ear, nor mind can penetrate, yet they are ready to believe what I say. But will they understand? x: iv, iii

## CHAPTER II

*THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF THE GLORIOUS  
MESSER SAINT FRANCIS AND OF HIS FRIARS*

## THE CANTICLE OF BROTHER SUN

*Most High, omnipotent, good Lord, thine is the praise, the glory, the honour and every benediction;*

*To thee alone, Most High, these do belong, and no man is worthy to name thee.*

*Praised be thou, my Lord, with all thy creatures, especially milord Brother Sun that dawns and lightens us;*

*And he, beautiful and radiant with great splendour, signifies thee, Most High.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars that thou hast made bright and precious and beautiful.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind, and for the air and cloud and the clear sky and for all weathers through which thou givest sustenance to thy creatures.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water, that is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire, through whom thou dost illumine the night, and comely is he and glad and bold and strong.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Sister, Our Mother Earth, that doth cherish and keep us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and the grass.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for those who forgive for love of thee, and endure sickness and tribulation; blessed are they who endure in peace; for by thee, Most High, shall they be crowned.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for our bodily death, from which no living man can escape; woe unto those who die in mortal sin.*

*Blessed are they that have found thy most holy will, for the second death shall do them no hurt.*


*Praise and bless my Lord, and render thanks, and serve Him with great humility.*

*Translated by Henry Osborn Taylor in "The Mediæval Mind," by permission of Macmillan and Company, London, 1911. Vol. I, pp. 439-440. (Note: The "Canticle" is one of two documents ascribed directly to Francis. The other is the Saint's Last Testament. Scholars incline to accept their authenticity.)*



## Chapter II

### THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF SAINT FRANCIS

AINT AUGUSTINE'S biographers, as we have seen, are accustomed to extenuate his youthful sins by referring them to the sultry and morally debilitating climate of North Africa. The biographer of Saint Francis is more happily placed. Not a breath of scandal or suspicion was ever visited upon Francis's early years in Assisi. He was a very perfect knight in a school of chaste chivalry. The setting of his life may well have been a safeguard. "Umbria," says an Italian writer, "shut away as it is in the exact centre of Italy lacks restless and voluptuous brilliance. . . . The entire land is enwrapped and transfigured by a soft, ethereal light. The air of the country is one of sweet austerity, without a touch of hardness or merely sensual charm, a very breath from the Infinite. The spirit has conquered and is supreme. Of all the parts of Italy Umbria is the nearest to God."<sup>1</sup>

The *Little Flowers*, like the character of the man whom it commemorates, was a growth of this soil. It has strength without harshness, sternness without severity, and a tenderness which is wholly free from weakness. These flowers were gathered just as they broke from the bud into first full bloom; not a petal is withered or about to fall. Their chastity is a thing of sweet austerity.

It has been said that the title of the book will prob-

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, Luigi Salvatorelli; tr. by Eric Sutton. New York, Alfred Knopf, 1928, pp. 5-6 (abridged).

ably sound effeminate to Anglo-Saxon ears. We should realize that it was a generic term, used by Italian writers of the time to designate a selection of passages from longer sources. Our word "anthology" might serve as a modern prose equivalent. In another of the Franciscan books we read, by way of preface, "These things we write not in the manner of a legend, since for long time legends have been composed of his life and of the miracles God wrought through him. But as from a pleasant meadow we pluck certain flowers which in our judgment are fairer, not following a continuous history, but leaving out many things as they befell, which in the foresaid legends have been set down in truthful and clear speech." The *Little Flowers* does not profess to be a life of Francis of Assisi. It tells us nothing whatsoever of his early years, his conversion, or his vocation to evangelical poverty. For all these matters we must turn to the official biographies of the Saint. The *Little Flowers* plunges with its first chapter into the midst of the story, and gives us thereafter not a consecutive history of the man and the movement, but merely vignettes of characteristic situations.

Read, for example, how while Saint Francis and the Friar Leo were on a journey, he expounded unto him those things which are perfect joy:

Once when St. Francis was coming from Perugia to Santa Maria degli Angeli with Friar Leo in the winter, and the very great cold vexed him sore, he called Friar Leo, who was going before, and spake after this manner: "Friar Leo, albeit the minor friars in every land set a great example of holiness and of good edification, never-

theless, write and note diligently that therein is not perfect joy." And when St. Francis had gone farther, he called unto him the second time: "O Friar Leo, although the minor friar should give sight to the blind, make straight the crooked, cast out devils, make the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the dumb to speak, and, what is a greater thing, should raise those who have been dead four days; write that therein is not perfect joy." Going a little farther, he shouted loudly: "O Friar Leo, if the minor friar knew all tongues, and all sciences, and all the Scriptures, so that he was able to prophesy and to reveal not only things to come but also the secrets of consciences and souls; write that therein is not perfect joy." Going a little farther, St. Francis yet again shouted loudly: "O Friar Leo, little sheep of God, albeit the minor friar should speak with the tongue of angels, and knew the courses of the stars and the virtues of herbs, and albeit all the treasures of the earth were revealed to him and he knew the virtues of birds and of fishes and of all animals and of men, of trees, of stones and of roots and of waters; write that therein is not perfect joy." And going yet farther a certain space, St. Francis shouted loudly: "O Friar Leo, although the minor friar should know to preach so well that he should convert all the infidels to the faith of Christ; write that therein is not perfect joy." And this manner of speech continuing for full two miles, Friar Leo, with great wonder, asked and said: "Father, I pray thee in the name of God to tell me wherein is perfect joy." And St. Francis answered him: "When we shall be at Santa Maria degli Angeli, thus soaked by the rain, and frozen by the cold, and befouled with mud, and afflicted with hunger, and shall knock at the door of the Place, and the doorkeeper shall come in anger and shall say: 'Who are ye?' and we shall say: 'We are two of your friars,' and he shall say: 'Ye speak not truth; rather are ye two lewd fellows who go about

deceiving the world and robbing the alms of the poor: get you hence'; and shall not open unto us, but shall make us stay outside in the snow and rain, cold and hungry, even until night; then, if we shall bear such great wrong and such cruelty and such rebuffs patiently, without disquieting ourselves and without murmuring against him; and shall think humbly and charitably that that doorkeeper really believes us to be that which he has called us, and that God makes him speak against us; O Friar Leo, write that here is perfect joy. . . . And if constrained by hunger and by cold and by the night, we shall continue to knock and shall call and beseech for the love of God, with great weeping, that he open unto us and let us in, and he, greatly offended thereat, shall say: 'These be importunate rascals; I will pay them well as they deserve,' and shall come forth with a knotty club and take us by the cowl, and shall throw us on the ground and roll us in the snow and shall cudgel us pitilessly and with cheerfulness, thinking on the sufferings of Christ the blessed, the which we ought to bear patiently for His love; O Friar Leo, write that here and in this is perfect joy; . . . But in the cross of tribulation and of affliction we may glory, because this is our own; and therefore the Apostle saith: *I would not glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" CH. VIII

Saint Francis of Assisi is to-day widely known and honored, but interest in him is relatively modern. Until the middle of the last century, "The whole world outside the Roman Catholic communion thought of him, if it thought of him at all, as a dead Roman Catholic."<sup>1</sup> The quest of the historical Francis, like the quest of the historical Jesus, has been a scholarly and spiritual enterprise of our own times. It was with Saint Francis as

<sup>1</sup> *St. Francis of Assisi, 1226-1926*. University of London Press, 1926, p. 247.

*if some mortal, born too soon,  
Were laid away in some great trance—the ages  
Coming and going all the while—till dawned  
His true time's advent.*

Not that his advent in his own day was not true, but that, after the passage of seven hundred years, something in our own day—perhaps its very lack of those qualities which he incarnated—has turned us again to him. In quest of Saint Francis Catholic and Protestant alike have joined with common devotion, and, like his Master, he is to-day a meeting place and bond of union for members of the divided Church. The study of his life does not incite to controversy; it summons us to behold the man, to wonder and to love.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross. We know what Nietzsche meant, yet we should all agree to supplement that restricted description of our religion by Renan's words, "One can say that, since Jesus, Francis of Assisi has been the only perfect Christian." No other single man down all the centuries of our epoch has more nearly recaptured the spirit of Jesus or reproduced the manner of his life. At certain points the parallelism is so close as to suggest moral identity. Francis and his Master seem one.

So, also, the Franciscan literature recaptures something of the original quality of the Gospels. In actual fact, the familiar comparison between Jesus and Francis is perpetuated in the books which tell the stories of their lives. It is a commonplace of modern scholarship that the four Gospels are not wholly ingenuous biographies. Behind each one of them lies a theological purpose, and

possibly the rival interests of different groups in the early Church. The ever-renewed struggle, with which all religious societies are only too familiar, between those who are concerned to standardize the life and words of a spiritual genius in an institution, and those who, fearing the letter that kills, seek to reaffirm the primitive spirit of the movement, is clearly written into the pages of the New Testament. The books about Saint Francis are products of the same process. Even before his death the Friars Minor had begun to know dissensions, and for a century and a half thereafter the Order was torn by controversy between the more ecclesiastically-minded, who favored, for the sake of the permanent stability of the Society, a relaxation of the severities of the Saint's own rule, and the "zealots" or "spirituals," who insisted upon continued fidelity to that rule.

Saint Francis died in 1226. The writing of books about him began immediately, and went on uninterruptedly for a century and a half. These books fall into two groups: the official lives of the Saint by such men as Thomas of Celano and Bonaventura, which represent the relaxed and standardized practice of the Order at large, and random collections of "Legends," "Mirrors" of the Saint's perfection, and "Acts" of himself and his more intimate companions. These latter works, occasional in form, undoubtedly perpetuate more accurately than do the official lives the evangelical temper of the founder. Though often later in time they are nearer to the original in spirit. The literary problem of the interrelations and interdependence of the various Franciscan writings is complicated and not yet wholly resolved. It presents

an interesting parallel to the technical difficulties which we meet in the study of the Gospels.

The *Little Flowers* belongs to the "spiritual" half of the books about the Saint. The earliest dated manuscript which we have is 1396. We do not know who edited the work, though we can identify many of the sources upon which he drew. It is probable that the book was compiled about the middle of the fourteenth century, perhaps a hundred and twenty-five years after Francis's death. Its late date might seem to discredit it, yet it drew on earlier works which are well authenticated, and, more particularly, its instinctive sympathy for Francis gave to it what we must regard as its unerring insight into his nature and character. If we may not lean upon the letter of the *Little Flowers* for historical accuracy, we may with confidence trust it for spiritual fidelity to its subject. It is still the most widely read and the best beloved of the books about Saint Francis precisely because, even after the lapse of a century or more, it is so true to his genius.

We found, in reading Augustine's *Confessions*, that we had to bring to the work, for its right understanding, a perspective which the text itself lacks. We need, in another form, a similar principle of discrimination for a proper appreciation of the *Little Flowers*. The world has been familiar, from most distant times, with the distinction between truth of fact and truth of poetry. To an age like our own, trained in the mental processes required by the sciences, truths of fact are held in higher esteem than truths of poetry. We are born Aristotelians. But we must always concede to the Platonist his right to a preference for poetic truth.

The pages of the *Little Flowers* waken in the mind of the modern reader countless questions as to actual happenings of fact. Did Saint Francis preach to the birds, did he tame the wolf of Gubbio, did he preach Christianity to the Soldan of Babylon, did he receive in his hands and feet and in his side the marks of the Crucified One? Given the realistic and critical processes of our minds these questions are inevitable. But we should realize that the truth of the *Little Flowers* does not depend upon any of the answers which we give, whether affirmative or negative. We must approach the book with what Coleridge calls "a willing suspension of unbelief." For it has been truly said that the *Little Flowers* is "a poem, too appealing to be trustworthy for history, yet which embodies in most perfect form the tradition that gave it birth. Its stories have a subtle fragrancy, as of wild thyme or rosemary or cypresses in the sun; they call up visions of high rocks and ilex-thickets and distant Umbrian hill-tops bathed in golden light. They transport one into a fairy land where judgment is suspended; one cannot accept, but one would not deny; one resigns oneself to the charm."<sup>1</sup> Only at the price of such resignation can we ever feel its truth and beauty.

The story of Francis's life is familiar. We read in the several sources how he was born in 1182, the son of a coarse and avaricious cloth merchant; how his youth, when away from his father's shop, was passed in gay and carefree companionship; how with his friends he sang of the court of love and dreamed deeds of chivalry; how he fared forth to war against the neighbor city of Perugia

<sup>1</sup> *St. Francis of Assisi, 1226-1926*, p. 158.



and was taken prisoner; how after his release he fell ill and lapsed into a mood of deep discontent; how the sense of some as yet undesignated mission grew upon him; how his generous spirit made him prodigal in gifts to any poor man by the way; how in a moment of pity he changed clothes with a beggar; how he forced himself to visit a leper hospital and give its inmates the kiss of peace; how a voice from God bade him begin the repairs of the ruinous little church of St. Damian; how his angry father summoned him as an unfilial recreant to the cloth trade before the bishop of Assisi, and how in the courtyard of the palace he stripped himself naked and gave back to his father the clothes he had had from him; how he vowed henceforth to call none father save his Father in Heaven; how he began to beg his own bread, and stones for the work of church building, in the streets of Assisi; how three companions joined themselves to him, and then another three, and still more, until with twelve disciples he went to Rome to seek papal sanction for his new Order of Little Poor Men; how at the centre of a steadily growing society he lived a life divided between prayer and acts of humblest service to the world around; how he sent out his followers on preaching missions and went himself to the outposts of his world; how the Order outgrew his powers of organization and control; how dissension and rivalries sprang up between the brothers; how at the last he withdrew to the mountain of La Verna, there to listen to heavenly voices and to receive the Stigmata; and how, at the last, he was brought back to the Portiuncula, where he died in 1226.

We, who have become used to living in a religious at-

mosphere that is murky and under skies which are overcast, have occasion to regret what a modern writer has called "the lost radiance of the Christian religion." It is precisely because Saint Francis has the power to recover for us this radiance that he holds us in fee. It is curious that a man who can do so little for us in life's details does so much for us in life's entirety. After Francis, the next man to arrest the imagination in a like way is Leo Tolstoy. We can, perhaps, understand Tolstoy better because he belongs to our time. Tolstoy was in his life, and remains in memory, a question mark set against all the conventions of Christendom—its theory of the state, its organization of the Church, its pursuit of money, its sexual habits, its flimsy arts. He has a power of putting questions in such a way that we cannot ignore them. Yet he failed to answer a single one of the questions he asked about government, or property, or marriage; nor can he show us how the world is to go on if we allow his imperious questions to bring us, as they brought him, to "a state of arrest."

In a more tender and persuasive way Francis of Assisi asked, in the thirteenth century, most of the questions which Tolstoy repeated in the nineteenth century. Yet there is in Tolstoy a harshness, perhaps even an unnatural pleasure in giving pain both to himself and to others, which was wholly wanting in Francis. A comparison of the two men, who were at one in renouncing the world and in celebrating poverty, suggests the controversy between the sun and the wind as to which could first make the traveler take off his coat. The gale of Tolstoy's savage recriminations makes you wrap the garment

of your self-righteousness more resolutely about you; the warmth of Saint Francis's charity warrants you in barring your naked moral need. When the story of the Little Poor Man of Assisi has been told in full, a hundred practical questions remain to be answered. Plainly all men cannot live as he and his followers lived; perhaps in this age of prose no man should dare again his poetry. How shall this world be supported if all turn beggars; how shall it be peopled if forever between two loving hearts there are the paving stones and the shuttered windows which separate the great Church of St. Francis from that of Santa Chiara? But in Assisi itself all these considerations seem irrelevant. The questioner is not denied his commonplace perplexities or his mitigated rule of life. Even Brother Elias relaxed the discipline in the Saint's own lifetime. All this is true; yet in Assisi the burden of proof is upon the critic rather than upon the believer. For there still lingers over that town an afterglow of the unearthly light which once fell so clearly upon it from the man himself.

Because St. Francis and his companions were called by God and chosen to bear in their hearts and in their works, and to preach with their tongues the Cross of Christ, they seemed and were men crucified, touching their habit and their austere life and their deeds and works; and because they desired rather to bear shames and insults for the love of Christ than the honours of the world and the respect and praise of men; yea, being reviled they rejoiced, and at honours they were afflicted; and so they went through the world as pilgrims and strangers, bearing nothing with them save Christ Crucified. CH. v

Once at least, since the days of Jesus, the veil between the worlds wore very thin, and this world and all that is in it became more lovely, bathed in that true light which lighteth every man coming into the world.

“That which distinguished Francis of Assisi in his own century and in every century,” says Renan, “is his utter originality.” Originality must always be distinguished from novelty, and there is no sphere in which it is more necessary to make and to maintain the distinction than in religion. When a religion becomes standardized, prophets and mystics are certain to appear who will attempt to reaffirm its first inwardness and to recover its primitive energy. The ensuing conflict between the fixed society and the free spirit is a commonplace in religious history. More often than otherwise the would-be reformers leave the settled institution in holy impatience, to become heretics and founders of schisms. Such a venture must always have about it the immediate appeal of novelty, and will therefore carry with it those whose first desire is to “hear some new thing.” But novelty is a short-lived phenomenon and the permutations and combinations of its familiar forms are limited. Moreover, since schismatics are wont to rest their case upon neglected truths, they too often condemn themselves to live permanently upon half-truths. For this reason a genuine reform within a settled religious society, though far more difficult to achieve than a schism, is more effective.

The age in which Francis lived was no stranger to heresies and schisms. On many sides novel creeds or moral codes were being freely proposed for the healing of the spiritual ills of the Church. The Albigenses, the

Cathari, the Waldenses, were in open revolt against Rome. The path of the reformer seemed plain; it led out of the Church into a world of theological and ethical innovation.

The "utter originality" of Saint Francis lay in his refusal to take the path of heresy and schism. There is no slightest reason to believe that he was even aware of it, much less that he considered it as a possible way of life for himself. No more devout and unquestioning churchman has ever lived. The current ecclesiastical abuses, with their attendant moral decadence, were matters of common knowledge. Francis met them with "the expulsive power of a new affection," rather than with criticism. He discredited the immoralities of the Church by the flank attack of a life of patent purity and rededication to Christian ideals. Whatever the faults of the secular clergy, members of the several orders, and the prelates, he passed no single word of adverse criticism upon them. He did not make a livelihood from the faults of others. He preached instead the duty of constant reception of the sacrament, and of unquestioning obedience to priests, bishops, cardinals, and pope.<sup>1</sup> It is harder

<sup>1</sup> Upon this point we are not dependent upon the testimony of disciples and biographers. We have Francis's own Last Testament, the authenticity of which is generally accepted. Cf. *St. Francis of Assisi*, Sabatier, pp. 337-338: "The Lord gave me and still gives me so great a faith in priests who live according to the form of the holy Roman Church, because of their sacerdotal character, that even if they persecuted me I would have recourse to them. And even though I had all the wisdom of Solomon, if I should find poor secular priests, I would not preach in their parishes without their consent. I desire to respect them like all others, to love them and honor them as my lords. I will not consider their sins, for in them I see the Son of God and they are my lords. I do this because here below I see nothing, I perceive nothing corporeally of the most high Son of God, if not his most holy Body and Blood, which they receive and which they alone distribute."

to do an original thing in this world than to do a novel thing—since originality is the marriage of the new to the old—but once done it is the more effective of the two. The secret of the “utter originality” of Francis, like that of Jesus before him, lay in his determination to fulfill rather than to destroy, but the apparent simplicity of their lives is deceptive; both were far more complex and mature characters than the outer manner of their living would suggest.

It was a happy thing for Francis that, in his dealings with the higher clergy, he met men in whom he found a tolerant charity. The world was full of nascent Protestantism, and it was a dangerous time in which to sanction enthusiasts, since by so doing a bishop or a pope was more likely than otherwise to add one more recruit to the already swollen ranks of fanatics. Only a man of truly spiritual insight can distinguish at a given moment between the autointoxicated zealot who will eventually run amok and the inspired genius who will make history. Fortunately Francis found in Guido, the bishop of Assisi, in Cardinal John of St. Paul, in Cardinal Hugolin of Ostia, and in Pope Innocent III, men of insight and sympathy. The College of Cardinals demurred at Francis's initial request that the Little Poor Men of Assisi be regularized as an order, but they were silenced by Cardinal John's words, “These men only want us to allow them to live after the gospel. If we now declare that this is impossible, then we declare that the gospel cannot be followed, and thus insult Christ, who is the origin of the gospel.” It is often said that the success of any reformation depends upon a timeliness in the words of the re-

former as well as upon his timeless truths. What he says and does must match a generally felt need in the common mind. The Franciscan movement might well have been stillborn in some other century. It thrived in the thirteenth century because it voiced the widespread hunger of plain people, and more particularly because its appeal to the finer natures in positions of authority was heard and sanctioned. Nevertheless, in regularizing the Franciscan Order the Church took a risk and we must give honor where honor is due.

The "utter originality" of Francis was, after all, a very simple thing, but like most simple things it is apt to remain hidden from the wise of this world. At the end of his life Saint Francis, looking back on his past, dated his conversion from the day he did deliberate violence to all his natural instincts in visiting the leper hospital and giving the kiss of fellowship to the sufferers there. His definition of his task and his dedication to it came at a later time, when, hearing Mass one day, he was arrested by a passage in the Gospel for the day read by the celebrant, which contained the words with which Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and preach that the kingdom was at hand, healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, raising the dead, and providing neither money nor raiment for the journey. This passage from the Vulgate fell strangely on Francis's ears, since the Bible was not then the familiar book it is to-day. Francis was not sure he had understood the words, and after Mass went to the priest and asked that they be reread and then translated to him. When the priest had finished Francis said, "Here is what I was looking for, here is what I will do." This

was his vocation and such was to be his life thereafter.

His originality lay, therefore, in implicit obedience to the letter of the teaching of Jesus. Whether the words of Jesus ever anticipated such obedience, whether when first spoken they were epigrams intended to hide rather than to reveal an inner and perhaps more spiritual meaning, whether life in any conceivable world-order remains possible to a man who undertakes their literal demonstration; all these questions are sophistications—possibly defense mechanisms of half-hearted souls—which Francis would not have understood. Religion was for him a way of life, an action, rather than a subject for speculation. He believed implicitly in what a later group of revolutionaries once called “the propaganda of the deed.”

We must not underrate the difficulty of the task which he set himself, the vindication of his new calling in a city where he was well known, and before family and friends who associated him with a wholly different manner of life. It is as though he had heard that other Gospel injunction, “Go home to thy friends.” Journeying at a later time to preach to the Soldan of Babylon would have been by contrast a relatively easy mission.

There was in Francis, as there had been in the Hebrew prophets, a vivid strain of self-dramatization. The Saint, like the prophet, deliberately did, from time to time, symbolic acts to give point to his words. His every thought had to be precipitated as conduct. He once suspected himself, we read in the *Little Flowers*, of the sin of presumption in his relations with Friar Bernard. It is as though the word, lacking the deed, remained unproved and unconvincing:



Upon one occasion among others, he left the Place where he was and went to the Place where Friar Bernard was, to speak with him of Divine things; and on reaching the Place, he found that he was in the wood in prayer, all uplifted and joined with God. Then St. Francis went into the wood and called him. "Come," said he, "and talk to this blind man"; and Friar Bernard answered him never a word; because, being a man of great contemplation, his mind was transported and raised to God; and because he had singular grace in speaking of God, as St. Francis had oftentimes proved, he therefore desired to speak with him. After waiting a little, he called him a second and a third time, in the same manner, and never a time did Friar Bernard hear him, and therefore he answered him not neither went unto him, so that St. Francis departed thence, somewhat cast down and marvelling and lamenting within himself that Friar Bernard, albeit he had been called three times, had not come unto him. Departing with this thought, St. Francis, after he had gone a little way, said unto his companion: "Await me here"; and he betook himself to a solitary place hard by, and casting himself upon his knees, besought God that He would reveal to him the reason why Friar Bernard had not answered him; and, while he yet prayed, there came to him a voice from God which spake thus: "O poor manikin, why art thou disquieted? Should a man leave God for a creature? Friar Bernard, when thou calledst him, was joined unto Me; and therefore he could not come to thee nor answer thee; marvel not then if he could not answer thee; because he was beside himself, and heard nothing of thy words." St. Francis, having received this answer from God, immediately and with great haste returned toward Friar Bernard, to accuse himself humbly of the thought which he had had concerning him. And when Friar Bernard saw him coming towards him, he went to meet him and cast himself down

at his feet; then did St. Francis lift him up, and with great humility he told him of the thought and tribulation which he had had concerning him, and of the answer which God had given him touching the same; and he made an end of speaking after this manner: "I command thee in the name of *'holy obedience'* to do that which I bid thee." Now Friar Bernard, fearing lest St. Francis should command something excessive, as he was wont to do, sought a way to escape from that obedience honestly; wherefore he made answer on this wise: "I am ready to do your obedience, if you promise me to do that which I shall command you." And when St. Francis had promised him, Friar Bernard said: "Now, father, tell me that which you wish me to do." Then said St. Francis: "I command thee in the name of holy obedience that, to punish my presumption and the arrogance of my heart, when now I shall cast myself down upon my back upon the earth, thou shalt set one foot on my throat and the other on my mouth and so pass over me three times, from one side to the other, crying shame and infamy upon me, and especially say thou unto me: 'Lie there, thou churl, son of Pietro Bernardoni, whence hast thou so much pride, thou that art a very abject creature?'" Hearing this, Friar Bernard, albeit it was exceeding hard for him to do so, for the sake of holy obedience, fulfilled that which St. Francis had commanded him, as courteously as he was able. CH. III

For the rest, and apart from these deliberately dramatic acts, the life of Francis was spent in homely tasks. He was truest to his genius and his vocation when single-handed he was gathering stones from the field to rebuild the little tumbled-down churches of the Umbrian countryside. By inference all else he did, his helping hand to any overworked field laborer, his spontaneous and al-

most wanton charity, his constant care for the sick—these acts were so many building stones in the restoration of Christ's Church. There was about his life, as there was in the life of Jesus, a strain of deliberate provincialism, an intensive rather than an extensive ministry to men. As a Danish biographer writes of him, "Like all humble souls he knew that it is of less importance what one does than how one does it, and he felt the call to what Verlaine many years after called *la vie humble aux travaux ennuyeux et faciles*—the humble life of tiresome and easy tasks; this life which, precisely on account of monotony and lack of great things to be done exacts so much charity, so great a power of seeing God's eternal will behind the whole mass of small endless affairs.

*Rester gai quand le jour, triste, succède au jour,  
être fort, et s'user en circonstances viles . . .*

Francis belonged to the strong and cheerful souls who can do this."<sup>1</sup> Here again, in his personal indifference to what we might call religious cosmopolitanism, we see the "utter originality" of Francis.

His originality is further manifest by his reinclusion of the natural world within the circle of Christian thought and feeling. I say "reinclusion" because for centuries conventional Christianity had had little feeling for nature. It is a strange thing, when you stop to think about it, that a religious tradition which had begun in the Old Testament with a profound feeling for nature, and which has its classical statement in the parables of Jesus with their instinctive trust in the fitness of the natural world

<sup>1</sup> *St. Francis of Assisi*, Johannes Jorgensen; tr. by T. O'Connor Sloane. London, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1912, p. 54.

to furnish analogies for the spiritual life, departed in this respect so far from its early norm. The original default and subsequent defect have often been attributed to the influence of Saint Paul, who is said to have imposed an urban mentality upon minds which previously had been conditioned by the countryside. However these things may be, the later New Testament, and the writings of the Fathers for centuries thereafter, are wanting in that feeling for nature which we find in the Psalmist, in Job, and in Jesus. Though, within the order of Providence, not a sparrow fell to the ground from the first century to the twelfth century, without the Father, during all that time those same sparrows lived and died neglected by one Christian generation after another.<sup>1</sup> Now, whatever else any one of us knows about Francis of Assisi, he knows that the Saint preached to the birds, and he knows Giotto's picture of that strange and tender scene. Francis, as the story runs, had been preaching to men and women, and had bidden the twittering swallows keep silence while he talked. And then, as he went on his journey, he chanced to see an almost infinite number of birds in the trees hard by the road, whereat he marveled and said:

"My sisters the birds, much are ye beholden unto God your creator, and always and in every place ought ye to praise Him, because He hath given you liberty to fly wheresoever ye will. . . . Again, ye are beholden to Him for the element of the air which He hath appointed for you; furthermore ye sow not neither do ye reap; yet God feedeth you and giveth you rivers and fountains where-

<sup>1</sup> Like all generalizations this statement must allow of the exception. Cf. the story of Columba's care, on Iona, of a storm-beaten crane, in Adaman's *Life of the Saint*.

from to drink; He giveth you mountains and valleys for your refuge, and high trees wherein to build your nests; and in that ye know not how to sew nor spin, God clotheth you and your little ones; wherefore doth your Creator love you seeing that he giveth you so many benefits. Guard yourselves therefore, my sisters the birds, from the sin of ingratitude and be ye ever mindful to give praise to God." . . . Finally when he had made an end of preaching St. Francis made over them the sign of the cross and gave them leave to depart; whereupon all those birds rose into the air with wondrous songs; and thereafter, according to the form of the Cross which St. Francis had made over them, they divided into four bands, and each company went singing marvellous songs; signifying that, even as St. Francis, the standard bearer of the Cross had preached to them . . . so the preaching of the Cross of Christ, renewed by St. Francis was about to be carried throughout all the world by him and his friars. CH. XVI

It was not for another five hundred years that it again occurred to men to stop and speak to birds, and even then their apostrophes to skylarks and nightingales were not sermons. To us, at this still later date, the place of the natural order within a moral and spiritual scheme of things is highly problematical. We rack our brains and vex our consciences with ethical perplexities which Francis would not have understood; yet if the Creator and the good God are the same, Saint Francis's feeling of instinctive identity with nature is probably nearer the right relation than our ethical suspicion of nature or our studied indifference to it. We have developed what a modern writer calls "a human 'class consciousness' in the presence of the rest of the universe"; the swallows to whom Francis preached have again flown beyond our Christian

ken. For the more of humanism, the less of nature mysticism. Meanwhile this phase of Saint Francis's character occasioned Sabatier's sweeping statement: "The sermon to the birds closed the reign of Byzantine art and of the thought of which it was the image. It is the end of dogmatism and authority; it is the coming of individualism and inspiration; very uncertain, no doubt, and to be followed by obstinate reactions, but none the less marking a date in the history of the human conscience."<sup>1</sup>

We have said that the character of Saint Francis, like that of Christ his Master, was essentially simple. The simplicity, however, was not that of a sterile uniformity. At the core of his mind there was a constant perplexity and in his conduct a radical contradiction. He was torn between the call of the contemplative life and the duties of the active life. He never resolved this contradiction, and no man ever has done so without impoverishing his character. He was always at a loss whether to go off alone into the solitude to pray, or to plunge into the societies of men to preach. He often asked his companions to advise him, even to make the choice for him. He was not the less Christian on that account. The truly religious man is one who, having become aware of the rival claims of prayer and work, never succeeds thereafter in reconciling them or solving his personal problem. Indeed, religion presupposes an awareness of this antithesis, since it represents in these specific terms man's ever-renewed and perpetually defeated attempt to live in two worlds at the same time.

<sup>1</sup> *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, Paul Sabatier; tr. by Louise Houghton. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902, p. 181.

There is in Bonaventura's life of the Saint a record of the Saint's own awareness of his dilemma:

What—asks Francis—do ye counsel, Brethren, what do ye command? Shall I devote myself to prayer, or shall I go about preaching? . . . Now in prayer there seemeth to be the gain of heaping up grace, in preaching a certain giving out of the gifts received from Heaven; in prayer again a cleansing of the inward feelings, and an union with the one, true, and highest good, together with a strengthening of virtue; in preaching the spiritual feet wax dusty, and many things distract a man, and discipline is relaxed. Finally, in prayer, we speak with God and hear Him, and live the life of angels, while we converse with angels; in preaching we must needs practise condescension toward men and, living among them as fellow-men, must think, see, say, and hear such things as pertain unto men.

The mediæval Church was familiar with the thesis *laborare est orare*,—"to work is to pray, to pray is to work,"—an epigram variously accredited to Bernard and Augustine. This simple equation promises what it never delivers, respite from the rival claims of the world within and the world without, of self-culture and the service of others. In practice the effect of concentration upon one of the members of this antithesis is to waken us freshly to the imperative claims of its opposite. Most of us pass our lives with this contradiction unresolved. If so, we may be heartened by the knowledge that Saint Francis was no stranger to our dilemma and that a felt tension between the demands of prayer and of work is inherent in the very nature of the religious life.

When Catherine Booth, the wife of General Booth,

lay dying, the Salvation Army was already a powerfully established fact, and with its spread there had come the inevitable differences of opinion and the struggle for pre-ferment and power from which even the most single-minded institutions are not exempt. On her deathbed she said to her daughter, "Kate, why is it that God can't keep a thing pure for more than one generation?" Of the many questions which religion proposes, few are more poignant and more difficult than this.

The same question, though perhaps never formulated in so many words, must have been in Saint Francis's mind as he came to the end of his brief life. He had seen his Order grow beyond his boldest hopes, grow so large indeed that its very size had become in turn an occasion for fresh fears. To the first Order had been added the second Order of nuns who gathered about Saint Clare. Subsequently the "Tertiaries" were regularized—lay men and women still living in the world and concerned with its daily necessary tasks, but practising so much of the Franciscan rule as their circumstance allowed.

Furthermore, no movement as permeated with emotion and as skeptical of critical learning as evangelical Franciscanism had been could defend itself against the excesses of fanatical recruits. The Order developed automatically its own zealots, who carried the rule of the founder to the point of caricature and brought both themselves and him into disrepute. Once again, there was no escape for so considerable a society from the problem of corporate sustenance as it must be faced in permanent communities. The institution of property, repudiated in favor of Lady Poverty by each individual



recruit, had to be welcomed back by the Society as a whole, so that the leaders of the movement found themselves compelled to "do many things officially, which privately they would have preferred not to do." With all these problems Francis, in illness and waning health, was too spent to grapple.

The régime of Brother Elias, which in retrospect is deplored and repudiated in the *Little Flowers* as a period of spiritual declension, laid the foundations for official Franciscanism. It is true that for a century thereafter repeated protests were made against the progressive secularization of the several Orders, and—as in the *Little Flowers*—the more spiritual brothers tried to rehabilitate the First Rule in its primitive and most austere spirit. Meanwhile, the end of the life of the Saint himself had been clouded by these controversies and perplexed by these issues. Having finished the work which God had given him to do, having manifested the life of Christ to those whom God had given him out of the world, Saint Francis turned his mind and heart from this world to the next world. Who shall say that he was wrong; more particularly, who shall deny him the solace of his visions at La Verna, or the seal of the finished work in the mystery of the Stigmata?

The history of the Franciscan movement was made at an inordinately rapid rate. This fact is, perhaps, a tribute to its purity and power. Most movements mature more slowly and the founders do not have to reckon in their lifetime with the problems faced by a second generation, which must seek to perpetuate the influence of a prophet or saint in his lengthened shadow as an institution. We

face here, as we face in the history of the Salvation Army in our own time, a problem with which religion must always reckon, and to which it has no single, clear answer—"Why cannot God keep a thing pure for more than one generation?" The emergence of this question, with its tacit confession of a felt impurity at a later time, is a conscious profession of a deeply felt desire for the lost purity of an earlier time. Whatever the "problem of Christianity" in our own day, we cannot immunize ourselves from the appeal of the self-evident and self-sufficient saintliness of the Little Poor Man of Assisi. It is our kind of Christian life which makes the problems, not his.

A modern essayist had occasion, not long since, to read, for review, two very different books—one on Saint Francis and the other on present-day Chicago. The contrast was too marked to leave his mind at ease:

Back one is driven to the old haunting question—Which of these have attained the real secret of success, these visionaries of Umbria long dead, or the solid live men who have made Chicago? Those who get or those who give? Truly if they were right, then the modern world is altogether wrong. . . . It may seem madness to cling to any divergent dream. Yet a certain suspicion refuses to be stifled. "What shall it profit?" appears at times written large over all the monstrous buildings and shrieking factories. For long after Chicago and Birmingham and all the products of a complacent and mechanical age have become the habitation of bats and owls, men's hearts will still turn with longing towards the little brown cities of Italy, for love of those whose fragrance clings to their crumbling walls and appeals across the silence of so many centuries.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *In Peril of Change*, C. F. G. Masterman. London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1905, pp. 188-189.

CHAPTER III  
*THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*

## OF THE KING'S WAY OF THE HOLY CROSS

*To many this seems a hard speech Deny thyself: take up thy cross, and follow Jesus. But much harder will it be to hear that last word: Depart from me ye cursed into eternal fire. For they who now gladly hear and follow the word of the Cross: shall not then be afraid to hear of eternal damnation.*

*The Cross shall be the sign in Heaven: when the Lord shall come to judgment. Then all the servants of the Cross who in their lifetime conformed themselves to the Crucified: shall draw near to Christ the Judge with great confidence.*

*Why then fear to take up the Cross; through which lies the road to the kingdom? In the Cross is salvation, in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection from enemies: in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind, in the Cross joy of Spirit: in the Cross the sum of virtue, in the Cross perfection of sanctity. There is no salvation for the soul nor hope of eternal life: but in the Cross. Take up therefore thy Cross and follow Jesus: and thou shalt go into life eternal. He went before bearing His Cross, and died for thee on the Cross; that thou also mayest bear thy Cross: and desire to die on the Cross. For if thou be dead with Him: thou shalt also live with Him. And if thou be partaker of His punishment: thou shalt be also of His glory.*


*Lo in the Cross is all, and in dying is all; and there is no other way to life and true inward peace: but the way of the holy Cross and of daily mortification. Walk where thou wilt, seek what thou wilt; thou wilt find no higher way above, nor safer way below: than the way of the holy Cross. Dispose and order all things as thou wilt and seest; yet shalt thou only learn that thou must always suffer, willingly or unwillingly: and so shalt thou always find the Cross.*

*¶ The Cross therefore is always ready: and everywhere waits for thee. Thou canst not escape it, whithersoever thou runnest; for go where thou wilt thou carriest thyself with thee: and shalt ever find thyself. Turn thyself upwards, turn thyself downwards: turn thyself outwards, turn thyself inwards: every where thou shalt find the Cross; and every where thou must needs keep patience: if thou wilt have inward peace, and earn an everlasting crown. THE IMITATION OF CHRIST, BOOK II: CH. XII. I*

## Chapter iii

### THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Seek a fit time to retire into thyself: and meditate often upon God's loving kindnesses. Throw aside subtleties; read thoroughly such books as rather stir compunction, than furnish occupation. If thou wilt withdraw from needless talk, and idle gadding about, as also from listening to news and rumours: thou shalt find leisure enough and suitable for meditation on good things. The greatest Saints avoided the society of men when they could: and rather chose to serve God in secret. 1: xx

OR five hundred years these words have sounded through Christendom. We hear them across the centuries as the reiterated note of a single great bell. Yet, as you listen intently to such a bell, you seem to feel its vibration and you hear the overtones which give to the initial note its depth and beauty.

The *Imitation of Christ* has passed into more than three thousand editions and has been translated into nearly every language in which the name of Christ is named. In the Widener Library at Harvard hundreds upon hundreds of feet of shelving are given up to these editions and translations. By contrast books about the *Imitation* are few and relatively unimportant. There can be no classic in the world, secular or religious, which has remained so free of the need of critical aids to its interpretation. This "small, old-fashioned book," as George Eliot calls it, "for which you need only pay sixpence at a bookstall," stands in its own right, self-explanatory and self-secure. It may be ignored; it cannot be misunderstood.

Shut thy door behind thee: and call upon Jesus thy

Beloved. Stay with him in thy cell: for thou shalt not find so great peace elsewhere. 1: xx

We may not heed that call; in the name of other interpretations of Christianity we may challenge it; we cannot mistake its meaning.

The *Imitation of Christ*, like many another religious work of the first order,—the Fourth Gospel, for instance,—makes no direct assertion as to its authorship. A manuscript in the Royal Library at Brussels, dated 1441, is signed as the work of Thomas à Kempis. The statement that he was its copyist does not necessarily imply that he was also its author. The possibility of other authorship has raised a babel of critical conjecture and the end of that controversy is not yet. We can only say that the conventional ascription of the book to à Kempis seems to persist and to survive counter claims.

The author of the *Imitation* was content to work unnoticed, and we need not be curious to lay bare a secret which he preferred to leave buried in forgetfulness. His own admonition is explicit, and we do well to remember it:

We ought . . . to read devout and simple books. . . . Let not the authority of the writer move thee, whether he be of small or great learning: but let the love of pure truth draw thee to read. Search not who said this: but mark what is said. Men pass: but the truth of the Lord abideth forever. 1: v

The truth and beauty of the *Imitation* would remain unimpaired were it to be proved, as has been variously suggested, that it was written by Jean Gerson, the Chancellor of the University of Paris, by Saint Bernard, by

Walter Hilton, the English mystic, or by some hypothetical author called into being by critics to assume the part.

Meanwhile, if traditional opinion is correct in attributing the book to the copyist of the Brussels manuscript, we have annals of his life which, though short and simple, are sufficient to give us its setting. He was born at the turn of the year 1380-1381, as Thomas Haemmerlein, or Hammerken, into an artisan family of the town of Kempen, in what is now the Netherlands. When he was twelve years old he went to a Brothers' School in the neighboring town of Deventer. At the age of nineteen he entered the Brother House at Mount Saint Agnes, near Zwolle. Here, save for two brief interruptions, he lived, as novice and monk, for over seventy years, and at Mount Saint Agnes he died in 1471, at the age of ninety-one.

His little world lies just to the east of the Zuider Zee. He can never have gone more than fifty miles from its centre, and most of his ninety years were bounded by towns which are only ten or fifteen miles apart. He practised what he preached, a quietness of life that was little less than immobility.

Run hither and thither: thou shalt find no rest. . . . Fan-  
cifulness and change of place, have deceived many. 1: ix

They who go much on pilgrimage, seldom become  
holy. 1: xxiii

There is in the life of Thomas a hint of the deliberate provincialism which we discern in the ministry of Jesus. It is only sixty or seventy miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem, but even those few miles are longer than the distance which separates Mount Saint Agnes from Kempen to the north and Deventer to the south.

We have said that something of their native lands was reflected in the lives of both Saint Augustine and Saint Francis of Assisi. It is dangerous to labor this thesis, making of free spirits the mechanical creatures of their circumstance. Yet once again we cannot ignore the parallelism between a countryside on the one hand and a man and his book on the other hand. Holland is a flat land and its dominant lines are horizontal. Artists tell us that a predominance of horizontal lines in any scene, whether actual or pictured, gives a sure suggestion of repose. The sentences and paragraphs of the *Imitation* lie level before the mind and the whole book is steeped in a serene tranquillity. Its quiet argument reminds one of Hobbema's familiar picture of "The Avenue." Here is a level land crossed by one straight road. The road is not suggested by the contours of the scene; it is willed by man. Its lengthening line is defined and given a measure of tenuous shade by tall trees which border it on either side. There is no occasion or inducement to wander afield, since here on this narrow road is such shelter as may be had from the heat and burden of the day, and rest may be found only where it ends. So it is with the way of life laid down in the *Imitation*; it goes its undeviating course, bounded by rigorous, yet beneficent rules. Here is a world where one must walk and not faint. We cannot dissociate the *Imitation* from the land where it was written, and in its pages clay of the pit whence it was dugged yearns to its fellow clay. It may well be that the level lines of the Low Countries say something to us about the pilgrimage of the human soul, left unsaid by semitropical Africa or by the high loveliness of the Umbrian hill towns.



The *Imitation of Christ* is hardly a novel work. It is, and was intended to be, replete with allusion and direct quotation. It is a deliberately wrought mosaic which makes use of material from many sources. There are occasional citations from the classics; there is constant use of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux; there are clues which lead to Suso and his fellow mystics; there are echoes of mediæval Latin hymns. But the *Imitation* is above all else a mosaic of Scripture, with more than a thousand direct quotations from the Bible. Its style and thought are essentially Biblical, and its literary pattern, with the balanced sentence, is taken from the Psalter. De Quincey says that "the enormous popularity of the *De Imitatione Christi* is virtually to be interpreted as a vicarious popularity of the Bible. At that time—the middle of the 15th century—the Bible was a fountain of inspired truth everywhere sealed up, but a whisper ran through the western nations of Europe that the work of Thomas à Kempis contained some slender rivulets of truth silently stealing into light from that interdicted fountain." Whether or not De Quincey is right in saying that the *Imitation* served its own day as a surrogate for Scripture, it has become for Christians the chief companion piece to the Bible, owing its hold over common mind to its predominantly Biblical character. *Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps its only rival, but Bunyan wrote later and then only to Protestants.

Yet the metaphor of the mosaic may be misleading. The *Imitation* was not studiously compiled from Scripture. It is a single, closely wrought work, wanting perhaps in novelty but marked by a profound originality. If it be mainly quotation, it is "inspired quotation."

Thomas à Kempis was a copyist; his last considerable task at Mount Saint Agnes was a transcript of the Vulgate, written in exquisite hand, which occupied him for fifteen years, 1425-1440. He belonged to the very last of the many generations of Christian copyists. For, during the final years in which he was completing his copy of the Vulgate, Lourens Coster was beginning to print from crude wood blocks, and ten years later, 1450, the Gutenberg Bible appeared at Mainz. There is something pathetic, yet not wholly inappropriate or out of character, in the remembrance of those seventy years which à Kempis spent in the Brother House at a meticulous and loving labor so soon to be superseded by the machine. Meanwhile the text of Scripture had become his second mental nature. An unerring instinct led him to ignore, for the purposes of the *Imitation*, all doubtful disputations in Scripture, all irrelevant legalism, all archaic fact, and to fasten upon such passages of the Bible as are concerned with that personal piety which is the heart of spiritual religion in every century. To the end of time the *Imitation* will be read or left unread, will stand or fall, with the Bible.

The familiar title of the work is an arbitrary one, and not necessarily inevitable. The *Imitation* is composed of four short books, which follow in broad outline the accepted stages of mystical experience—Vision, Discipline, Union with God. To each of these books Thomas gave a caption, but to the work as a whole he gave no name. An early manuscript now in Oxford calls it *The Ecclesiastical Music*. The designation is so appropriate that certain modern editors employ it as a subtitle. In much of

the text there are cadence, rhythm, and occasionally rhyme. The original punctuation was plainly intended to be a guide for one who is to read the text aloud, and may indeed indicate that the work was to be sung in plain-song, as an informal supplement to the Psalter.

Meanwhile the familiar title is borrowed from the heading of Book I, Chapter I, "Of the Imitation of Christ, and Contempt of all the Vanities of the World." The use of the word "imitation," as a supposed index to the work as a whole, has given both difficulty and offense. Harnack points out, in his *History of Dogma*, that in the vital and creative periods of Christian history we do not find any idea of an imitation of Christ. That conception, he implies, belongs to the slack and sterile periods of our religion. Critics to whom à Kempis and his book are uncongenial say that the way of life here proposed, so far from being an imitation of Christ, is a counterfeit of Christianity, bearing little resemblance to the Gospel pattern.

We owe à Kempis justice and generous sympathy at this point. We have ourselves to blame, not him, for the title we have chosen for his book. He probably would have been the first to question the propriety of imposing this particular term, from a single chapter heading, upon his work as a whole. On the other hand we must remember that he spent his life as a copyist, and that the ideal of a faithful copy of a beautiful original was one which might fitly claim his devotion. Furthermore, the fact of imitation is one which is graven deep into nature and human society. Most of our early education and nearly all of our youthful religion and morality are founded

upon imitative processes. Imitation may not be the end of the religious life; it is more often than otherwise its natural and wholly proper beginning. We speak as though spiritual originality were a birthright endowment, whereas it is in truth a spiritual achievement rare even in maturity. Thomas à Kempis was not a literal copyist of Jesus of Nazareth. As a matter of actual fact there was far more deliberate imitation of Jesus in the life of Saint Francis than in that of the author of the *Imitation*. À Kempis had no interest in what we now know as the historical approach to his subject, and would have been baffled by the modern question, "What would Jesus do?" He was a first-hand and original Christian soul, of a distinct yet very devout type. It is just neither to his character nor to his book to pillory him as a slavish imitator, even though his lifelong occupation as a copyist furnished him with a term which must have had for him meanings and values which we cannot recover.

One of his biographers reports à Kempis as having said, "In many things I have sought for rest, and have not found it except in little nooks with little books." That last familiar phrase sounds, for better or for worse, the theme of the *Imitation*. It recurs with slight elaborations and variations throughout the entire work. The voice we hear in its pages is the voice of a recluse, who has wittingly and willingly severed the ties which bind him to the wider world of men and its vast affairs.

Avoid the tumult of men as much as thou canst: for talk about worldly events is a great hindrance. . . . Often I could wish that I had held my peace and that I had not been in company. 1: x

Turn thine eyes upon thyself: and beware thou judge not the actions of others. In judging of others a man labours in vain; often errs, and easily sins: but in judging and examining himself he always labours fruitfully. I: xiv

A cell well-kept is delightsome: ill kept is full of weariness. If in the beginning of thy conversion thou hast dwelt in it and guarded it well: it will afterwards be to thee a dear friend and a most pleasant comfort. . . . What canst thou see elsewhere, which thou canst not see here? I: xx

Keep thyself as a pilgrim and a stranger upon earth: to whom the affairs of this world do nothing appertain. Keep thy heart free and uplifted to God: because thou hast here no abiding city. I: xxiii

Thou wilt always rejoice at eventide: if thou spend the day fruitfully. Watch over thyself: arouse thyself, warn thyself; and whatsoever becomes of others: neglect not thyself. I: xxv. iii

The Kingdom of God is within you saith the Lord. Turn thee with thy whole heart unto the Lord; and forsake this wretched world: and thy soul shall find rest. Learn to despise the outward and to give thyself to the inward. II: I

The inward man sets the care of himself before all other cares. . . . When thou hast skimmed all things; what hast thou profited if thou hast neglected thyself. If thou desirest peace and true unity; thou must count all things less than this: and look only upon thyself. II: v

Such injunctions, and they are the essence of the *Imitation*, not its accidents, have laid the book open to the charge of being "a manual of sacred selfishness." Here, we are told, is a caricature of Christianity which derives from the soured soul of a mediæval monk. It is true that most of the major monastic movements passed from their evangelical and apostolic period of purity to post-apos-

tolitic times of moral laxity. They were first good, then bad. But in the *Imitation*, it is said, we pass beyond that stage, and meet only a barren sterility, impotent to beget either the brave virtues or the lusty vices of a healthy organism. Here, in fact, is the perfect spiritual eunuch for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. The case for the prosecution, which has usually been Protestant in origin, has been stated many times, but never more vigorously than by Dean Milman:

*The Imitation of Christ* . . . is absolutely and entirely selfish in its aim, as in its acts. Its sole, single, exclusive object, is the purification, the elevation of the individual soul, of the man absolutely isolated from his kind, of the man dwelling alone in solitude, in the hermitage of his own thoughts: with no fears or hopes, no sympathies of our common nature: he has absolutely withdrawn and secluded himself not only from the cares, the trials, but from the duties, the connexions, the moral and religious fate of the world. Never was misnomer so glaring, if justly considered, as the title of the book, the *Imitation of Christ*. That which distinguishes Christ, that which distinguishes Christ's Apostles—that which distinguishes Christ's religion—the Love of Man—is entirely and absolutely left out. . . . The *Imitation of Christ* begins in self and terminates in self. . . . The world is dead to the votary of the *Imitation*, and he is dead to the world, dead in a sense absolutely repudiated by the first vital principles of the Christian Faith.<sup>1</sup>

Such, then, is the thesis of the *Imitation* and such is the indictment which, to the point of tedium, has been brought against it. To this issue we must now address ourselves, for if the first and last of à Kempis's contentions

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Latin Christianity*, by Henry Hart Milman, BK. XIV, CH. 3.

fall to the ground, the pattern of his carefully wrought mosaic is destroyed and we are left with a rubble heap of rules to be broken and ideals to be discarded.

The *Imitation of Christ* can mean nothing to those who believe that religion is purely social in its origin and in its characteristic manifestations. We should remember, however, that though he counsels solitude, à Kempis lived in an organized society of men, and shunned the hermit way. Nevertheless, it was true that the manner of his life, in its relations with other men, conformed to the injunction, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me." À Kempis distrusts what has been called "the interfering spirit of righteousness," which we find in certain types of Christianity. He constantly counsels patience with the infirmities of one's associates, but his refusal to intermeddle with the lives of other men is of a piece with his dread of censoriousness. He is not responsible to God for the character of others; only for his own. His problem, it has been said, was "not how to get a different world, but a different self."

We cannot arbitrate here. Human beings are variously endowed, and in spite of their studied profession of dispassionateness, historians of religion are prone to be prejudiced persons. Let us admit that the *Imitation* can mean nothing to those for whom Christianity is first and last a sociological datum. But to those who are not strangers to solitude and for whom loneliness carries no dread, the *Imitation* speaks plainly and intelligibly. It matches the now familiar modern statement that "the great religious conceptions which haunt the imagination of civilized mankind are scenes of solitariness. . . . Religion is

solitariness; and if you are never solitary, you are never religious."<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile à Kempis never aspired to be alone, and it is only a caricature of the *Imitation* which suggests this interpretation of his rule. In the opening chapter of the *Apologia* Newman says that a basic mistrust of the reality of material things made him "rest in the thought of two and two only absolutely and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator." To a man who lacks faith in God Newman's words are little more than shifting sand, but to one who believes in God there are moments when this final and naked duality is the only reality. It is upon this rock that à Kempis built his book. Here is no man nursing solitary grudges or eating out his heart in bitter loneliness; but rather one who, torn between two worlds, "desires to depart and be with Christ; which is far better." A Kempis's concern with the self is not an ultimate one; it is mediate and disciplinary. He bids us in so many words to have "humble conceit of ourselves," and the humility which he counsels is truly religious in that it consists, not in thinking meanly upon ourselves, but in not thinking of ourselves at all, because our minds are turned towards Jesus. You cannot call any book a manual of sacred selfishness which says:

Love all for Jesus: but Jesus for Himself. Jesus Christ alone is singularly to be beloved: who alone is found good and faithful above all friends. For Him and in Him let friends and foes alike be dear unto thee. II: VIII. III

That last sentence is, and plainly was intended to be,

<sup>1</sup> *Religion in the Making*, by Alfred North Whitehead. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1926, pp. 17, 19.



reminiscent of a passage we have already noted in Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>1</sup> But with both men the self and other selves are bracketed by a divine principle:

Blessed is he that understands what it is to love Jesus: and to despise himself for Jesus' sake. Thou shouldest leave the beloved for the Beloved: for Jesus will be loved alone above all things. II: VII

This use of the name of Jesus is characteristic of à Kempis. Augustine would have said "God," but in this respect à Kempis's habit is nearer the heart of evangelical piety. The word appeals our devotion to Christ from all later theological titles to the original figure of the Gospels. Not long ago a distinguished Anglican said that when he heard anyone use the word "Jesus,"—rather than "our Lord," "the Saviour," "Christ,"—he knew that he was in liberal Protestant circles. Yet in the *Imitation* we are not aware of any pre-Protestant or minimizing theology, only of an utter religious simplicity. The spirit of solitude which breathes through the *Imitation* is, therefore, not absolute; it is an intimation of the presence of Jesus, who was the joy of à Kempis's loving heart.<sup>v</sup>

Furthermore, we do him and his companions at Mount Saint Agnes grave injustice if we allow to pass unchallenged Dean Milman's statement that the *Imitation* is "the last effort of Latin Christianity," and that we must "shake off indignantly the barbarism, the vices, and even the virtues of the Mediæval, of Monastic, of Latin, Christianity."

<sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, IV: IX, "Blessed is he who loves Thee, and his friend in Thee, and his enemy for Thee. For he alone loses no one dear to him, to whom all are dear in Him who never can be lost." Here is a good example of what we have called à Kempis's "second mental nature" in the use of the Bible and the Fathers.

The religious community in which à Kempis spent his life was one of those less rigorous religious orders which sprang up all over Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Brethren of the Common Life were founded by Gerhard Groot, a rich man of Deventer, who had made himself poor for Christ's sake. When Groot's successor proposed to regularize the Brotherhoods he went to Ruysbroek for advice. He had thought of either the Carthusian or the Cistercian rule as a pattern. Ruysbroek advised against them as being too severe, and proposed a more lenient rule. The Brethren were therefore organized as Augustinian Canons Regular. The movement was restricted to the Low Country where the Brotherhood was born; its houses were composed of groups of monks at their centre, and of lay people at the periphery living a common life together, going and coming in the world as their work required. They were not ascetic, save for vows of poverty and chastity; they were neither idlers nor beggars. They looked for support to the work of their own hands rather than to alms. A candidate for admission had to assure the prior that he could eat well and sleep well and was capable of hard manual labor. One or two unfortunate experiences with fanatics had closed the doors of the Brother Houses to persons who preferred ascetic abuse of the body to its religious use. The Brothers taught in the grammar schools of their towns; they ministered to the sick, and the recurrence of the Black Death was a steady challenge to their courageous sympathy. More particularly they were copyists. The livelihood of their societies was mainly derived from transcribing manuscripts.

The picture we have of this life, disciplined, but never perverted by excessive austerities; simple in its daily ways, but sufficient for the body's wants; reticent in its interior intimacies, but tender in its care of children and sufferers; meticulous and sensitive to beauty in its daily business of transmitting the past to the future in the form of lovely manuscripts—all this is not unattractive. Thackeray adds his vitriol to that of Milman when he says: "The scheme of the [*Imitation*] carried out would make the world the most wretched, useless, dreary, doting place of sojourn. There would be no manhood, no love, no tender ties of mother and child, no use of intellect, no trade or science—a set of selfish beings, crawling about, avoiding one another, and howling a perpetual *Miserere*." It is doubtful whether a more inaccurate sentence could be compounded to describe the life which à Kempis and the Brethren lived at Mount Saint Agnes. Perhaps no Protestant can be expected to understand the appeal and the compensations of monastic life. But it has been far too much our Protestant fashion to linger with relish upon the vices of monasticism and to ignore its virtues. Dean Milman and Thackeray write as angry men, and we now know enough about the workings of the human mind to realize that excessive anger is usually a protective device. Just to the degree that the *Imitation*—a shaft from a bow drawn at a venture—gets between the joints of the armor of our moral complacency are we impatient to tear it out of mind.

The Brother Houses of the Low Countries did not long outlast the generation of à Kempis, and his book is their one chief mark upon ongoing Christianity, Catholic and

Protestant alike. Their livelihood as copyists was suddenly and finally ended by the invention of printing. Their simple and wholesome piety was swept into the enthusiasms of the Reformation to be either fulfilled or frustrated in the happenings of the sixteenth century. But stray sentences in the *Imitation*, which seem to be assumed as a matter of course rather than labored as maxims, give us a glimpse of the monastery at Mount Saint Agnes during the first half of the fifteenth century.

He does well: that serves the community rather than his own will. i: xv

Ever be patient in bearing with the defects and infirmities of others of what sort soever they be: for thou also hast many which must be borne with by others. i: xvi

For no man is without fault, no man without his burdens: no man sufficient for himself, no man wise enough for himself; but we ought to bear with one another, comfort one another: help, instruct and admonish one another. i: xvi

The Old Serpent will goad and embitter thee; but by prayer he shall be put to flight; moreover by useful employment thou shalt bar his main approach. iv: xii

Never be wholly idle: but either reading or writing, or praying or meditating, or endeavouring to do something for the common good. i: xix

These are not the words of an unsocial or self-centred recluse. They are the measured words of a disciplined member of an orderly community. It is true that we have in the *Imitation* a strain of impersonality in the area of human relations, which recurs constantly in most mystical treatises. The attitude is characteristic of à Kempis, but not peculiar to him. All the mystics kept their fellow

men at arm's length and the author of the *Imitation* runs true to that form when he warns us "That Too Much Familiarity is to be Shunned":

Lay not thy heart open to every man: but plead thy cause with the wise and such as fear God. Be not much with young people and strangers. Keep company with the humble and simple. . . . Be not familiar with any woman: but in general commend all good women to God. . . . We must have charity towards all: but familiarity is not expedient. I: VIII

Indeed, precisely this quality of impersonality and detachment is the clue to what otherwise may well be construed as the selfishness of à Kempis. The saint, like the artist, accepts his endowment and his vocation as a trust to be administered dispassionately. He is more concerned for self-discipline than for self-culture, and such attention as he gives to the care of the self springs from his impersonal conviction that the self is not his own, but belongs to God. Many poets, painters, and musicians have shared à Kempis's conviction without incurring the charge of undue egotism. There is no reason why we should deplore in the saint traits which we concede and even approve in the artist.

As for the duties which à Kempis counsels, it is true that they ignore those wider social obligations which our modern interpretations of Christianity now require. We of this later day believe that, at whatever risk to our prospects of private salvation, the Christian life should be lived for better or for worse in the world of affairs. These affairs were in à Kempis's day world-shaking. The English wars with France had carried over from the four-

teenth century half through the fifteenth. Agincourt was being fought while he was planning the *Imitation*. Joan of Arc was being burnt at the time that he turned to his task of copying the Vulgate. To the East Constantinople fell, and the Wars of the Roses were begun in the West, during his latter years. Of all this, and much more to the same effect, there is no trace in the *Imitation*. The quiet tenor of à Kempis's ways was undisturbed by these external wars and rumors of wars. The world fought on many historic fields during the ninety years of his life, fields which were variously political, economic, moral, and religious, and à Kempis was not there. We may say, if we so elect, that he was recreant to his age.

But this, at least, must be said in defense of à Kempis and the Brethren of the Common Life: he fought his spiritual battle on the most desperate of all fields, that where the issues of self-mastery are determined.

Who hath a harder battle; than he that strives to overcome himself? And this should be our business, to conquer ourselves; and daily wax stronger than ourselves: and make some growth in holiness. I: III. II

There is in our modern social gospel the danger that, unconsciously perhaps, rather than consciously, a man may use it as a city of refuge from an awareness of his own moral failures or his unsubdued nature. It is relatively easy to reform the world in theory and, by contrast, hard to master one's self. Self-conquest may be a meagre spiritual ideal for Christians, but this at least must be said of à Kempis, he was right in intimating that the spiritual battle can never be won on any other field if it is lost on this field. The social gospel should never be-

come an instrument of moral evasion for the man who is in doubt as to his own sincerity or integrity.

As for the cool, tranquil, and impersonal life at Mount Saint Agnes, its interests and its rules can never be wholly outmoded. There is abroad to-day a conviction that the salvation of our world may well rest, not with individual prophets, since the age is too vast and too complex for any one man to compass, but in intimate communities of like-minded men sharing a common life; not monasteries of the more austere and occluded type, but open houses like those of the Brethren of the Common Life. A modern writer, who has the distresses of our day much at heart, says that hope for the immediate future lies in the growth of small "associations of devoted individuals" who live together under a common, self-imposed rule. "Such associations," he tells us, "should be founded for the pursuit of noble ends and in the name of a high ideal. The fact that a community demands considerable sacrifices from its members, imposes a strict discipline and exacts unremitting effort is not a disadvantage. . . . The function of the well-intentioned individual, acting in isolation, is to formulate or disseminate theoretical truths. The function of well-intentioned individuals in association is to live in accordance with those truths, to demonstrate what happens when theory is translated into practice, to create small-scale working models of the better form of society to which the speculative idealist looks forward."<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Groot and his disciples would have regarded these words as an untheological and wholly

<sup>1</sup> *Ends and Means*, by Aldous Huxley. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1937, pp. 157-158.

secular account of the aims of the Brethren of the Common Life, yet I venture to suggest that as a transcript of the life of à Kempis and his companions they are much nearer the truth than are the ungenerous judgments of Milman and Thackeray.

Whatever else may be said against the rule which obtained at Mount Saint Agnes, this must be said in its behalf, that it held for an obedient brother the secret of happiness. The *Imitation* has no trace of strain or ascetic unhealthiness. The life which it pictures was not without its simple pleasures, even though pleasure as a direct end had been put behind. Happiness, a more constant state of mind and heart, was apparently achieved by bringing order from the chaos of the vagrant and rival interests of our natures, by organizing all life around a single purpose. À Kempis has much to say of the virtue of Simplicity. In one of his most characteristic and deservedly famous passages he tells us that

By two wings a man is lifted up from earth: namely by Simplicity and Purity. II: IV

Here, as elsewhere in Christian thought, simplicity means singleness.

Yet even this happiness of the simple life was constantly imperiled. The sun did not always shine, and the clouds had a way of returning after the rain. There are few books in our tradition more mature than the *Imitation* in the treatment accorded to the moral mystery of life's spiritually overcast days. In his study of *The Medieval Mind*, Henry Osborn Taylor gives us an account of the rise, successively, of the great monastic orders and



then passes on to a sombre chapter on "The Spotted Actuality," in which he dwells upon the reappearance within monasticism of "the acquisitive, self-seeking, lustful qualities of men which lie at the base of life." The story is familiar and may be easily verified in contemporary records of ecclesiastical visitations to religious houses at any time from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century.

In such records as we have of the Brother Houses there are few traces either of corporate acquisitiveness or of individual lusts. The Brethren of the Common Life were, as an Order, short-lived and therefore had no time to amass great wealth even had they desired to do so. As for bodily desire, one is reminded of the story of the traveler who stopped at the door of a hermit's cell in the desert, and asked, "How is it, brother, with the lust of the flesh?" and heard the answer from a tired but confident voice, "It knocketh, but it passeth on." There may have been—there must well have been—such knocking at the gate of Mount Saint Agnes, but the whole tenor of the *Imitation* is to another purpose, "It passeth on."

No, the thrusts of the animal man did not furnish the darker side of the shield of life for à Kempis. Being human he would have counted nothing human foreign to himself, but by the time we hear him speaking he was prepared to make successful moral reckoning with the primal passions. His problem was, if you will, a more sophisticated one, yet a very real one, known to mysticism as the Dark Night of the Soul—dryness, barrenness, unreality, emptiness. The technical term is "accidie," torpor.

There is no order so holy nor place so secret: where

there be not temptations or adversities. There is no man that is altogether safe from temptation whilst he lives; for in ourselves is the root thereof. I: XIII

I never found any so religious and devout, that he had not sometimes a withdrawing of grace: or felt not some decrease of zeal. There was never Saint so highly rapt and illuminated: who before or after was not tempted. For he is not worthy of the high contemplation of God; who has not been exercised with some tribulation for God's sake. II: IX. III

I am often confounded within myself and blush, that I come with such lukewarmness yea coldness to Thy Altar and the Table of Sacred Communion; that I remain so dry and heartless. III: XIV

Thinkest thou that thou shalt always have spiritual consolations at thine own will? My saints had not such always; but they bore many afflictions and various temptations: with great desolation. IV: XXXV. III

What has à Kempis to say, in answer to himself at the time of spiritual dryness and bitterness? Certain of his chapter headings give us a hint of his answer: "That a Man should not be too much Dejected when he falleth into some Defects"; "That a Man ought to employ himself in works of Humility when strength is wanting for Higher Employments." The *Imitation* is, at this point, a wise book. It draws upon a deep well of religious experience, and for that reason its counsels are not those of an impossible perfectionism. À Kempis knew by instinct what most men have to learn line upon line and precept by precept, that our emotions are not subject to our wills. Feeling cannot be commanded. It has its own times and seasons and is a law unto itself. For à Kempis his seasons of sweet reassurance were a gift of God's grace, and being

so construed it was his part to accept them with gratitude but not to attempt their coercion. There is no residual trace of any attempted magical manipulation of the world of the spirit in his dealing with the religious emotions. Indeed, so arbitrary is the life of feeling that when feeling is present he dares not trust it as a proof of his spiritual excellence, therefore he need not construe its absence as a sign of mortal sin. In the life of feeling we must take what comes and go our way. Our primary concern is a moral one, and our duty is to "carry on." À Kempis's wise words upon this problem, in one form or another so real to all men, can never be outmoded, and it is doubtful whether any wisdom may be had upon the matter more mature than that which is written into the *Imitation*.

When therefore spiritual comfort is given thee from God, receive it with thankfulness; but understand that it is the gift of God, not any desert of thine. . . . When consolation is taken from thee do not immediately despair; but with humility and patience wait for the heavenly visitation. II: IX. II

Wait for the Lord, quit thyself like a man and be strong; distrust not, desert not. IV: XXXV. III

Son, I am more pleased by patience and humility in adversities: than by much comfort and devotion when things go well. . . . All is not spoiled: although thou feel thyself often afflicted or grievously tempted. Thou art flesh, not angel. . . . Let it pass. It is not the first nor is it new: nor will it be the last if thou live long. . . . Be calmer and gird thyself to greater endurance. IV: LVII

At such times it is expedient for thee to flee to humble and outward works: and refresh thyself with good actions; to expect with firm confidence My coming and

visitation from above: to bear patiently thy banishment and the dryness of thy mind; till I shall again visit thee: and set thee free from all anxieties. IV: LI

Whether or not à Kempis is to be counted among the accredited mystics of the Middle Ages is an open question. The regimen of life which he proposed follows the familiar steps of the *scala perfectionis*—the ladder of perfection—and his accounts, both of the visions which stir us to spiritual endeavor and of the subsequent disciplines we undergo, run true to the conventional pattern of mystical treatises. If he fails of a place in the recognized society of mystics, this failure must be charged to his silence or reticences regarding the final stage of mystical experience, that of union with God. He has no trances or ecstasies to record. He does not struggle, inarticulately, with the ineffable experience. He makes no use of the bolder words and phrases which we find in classical mysticism—"the Divine Dark," "the Divine Abyss," "the still desert of the Godhead," "the Dim Silence where all Lovers lose themselves," "the Cloud of Unknowing," "the Night of Thought."

The third book of the *Imitation* is concerned with the Sacrament, and in its chapters à Kempis speaks devoutly of the proper conditions for reception of the Communion and of the sweetness of Christ's words heard in the Canon of the Mass. But even here he knows that he is not always "wholly kindled . . . nor so strongly drawn and affected as many devout persons have been," and steels himself even at the altar against "excessive striving for devotion." If this sobriety of spirit condemns à Kempis to the outer court of mysticism, it keeps him in the company of the

vast majority of his fellow Christians. The final mystical experience is vouchsafed only to a few individuals and to them only on rare occasions. The imagery which they use to indicate its content is unintelligible to most of us, and, on occasion, we cannot resist the suggestion of a certain unhealthiness of mind in their language. The *Imitation* never stirs in us resentment or perplexity because of recorded experiences from which we feel ourselves shut out. It is an austere book, but never exclusive. It is a stern book, but it is not a forbidding book.

For after winter follows summer: after night returns the day, and after tempest a great calm. II: VIII. III

The joy of which à Kempis speaks, and in which he rests, is one to which any man may aspire. It is the one joy without which all other spiritual joys are an illusion or a deception. À Kempis has named its name; it is "The Joy of a Good Conscience."

The glory of a good man: is the testimony of a good conscience.

Have a good conscience: and thou shalt have every joy. A good conscience can carry very much: and is very cheerful in adversities. . . . Thou shalt rest sweetly: if thy heart do not accuse thee. II: VI



CHAPTER IV  
*THE THEOLOGIA GERMANICA*

HOW WE ARE TO TAKE THAT SAYING, THAT WE MUST COME TO  
BE WITHOUT WILL, WISDOM, LOVE, DESIRE, KNOWLEDGE,  
AND THE LIKE

*Behold on this sort must we cast all things from us, and strip ourselves of them; we must refrain from claiming anything for our own. When we do this, we shall have the best, fullest, clearest and noblest knowledge that a man can have, and also the noblest and purest love, will and desire; for then these will be all of God alone. It is much better that they should be God's than the creature's. Now that I ascribe anything good to myself, as if I were, or had done, or knew, or could perform any good thing, or that it were mine, this is all of sin and folly. For if the truth were rightly known by me, I should also know that I am not that good thing and that it is not mine, nor of me, and that I do not know it, and cannot do it, and the like. If this came to pass, I should needs cease to call anything my own.*


*It is better that God, or His Works, should be known, as far as it be possible to us, and loved, praised and honoured, and the like, and even that man should vainly imagine he loveth or praiseth God, than that God should be altogether unpraised, unloved, unhonoured and unknown. For when the vain imagination and ignorance are turned into an understanding and knowledge of the truth, the claiming anything for our own will cease of itself. Then the man says: "Behold! I, poor fool that I was, imagined it was I, but behold! it is and was, of a truth, God!"*

THE THEOLOGIA GERMANICA, CH. V



## Chapter iv

### THE THEOLOGIA GERMANICA

 HERE is in Tolstoy's *Confessions* a well-known passage describing the crisis in mid-life which finally turned him to the Gospels:

Five years ago a strange state of mind began to grow upon me: I had moments of perplexity, of a stoppage, as it were, as if I did not know how I was to live.

Questions presented themselves to my mind with ever increasing frequency, demanding an answer with still greater and greater persistence, and like dots grouped themselves in one black spot.

Tolstoy was facing the stubborn question, "What shall I do with myself?" The metaphor of dots merging into one dark blot is faithful to common experience. The problem what to do with oneself comes over the horizon early in life as the idle discontent of childhood and youth. It becomes more insistent as we grow older and, unless we find a working solution, finally fastens on us as a miserable obsession. We have already met this misery in Saint Augustine's cry, "I remained to myself as a luckless place, where I could neither stay nor get away. . . . Whither could I flee from myself? whither should I not follow myself?"

The proposed answers to the problem of the self are many. The hedonist invites us to enjoy ourselves; the teacher urges us to educate ourselves; the artist encourages us to express ourselves; the philosopher bids us know ourselves. Our native instincts, fortified by one or another of these counselors, suggest an expan-

sive and aggressive life for the self. It is one, at least, of the differentia of religion that in this elemental matter it moves in a direction counter to that prompted by nature. The great religions of the world are agreed that self-assertion can give only temporary satisfaction and must lead to progressive disappointments. As long as we are self-assertive we shall be looking for more worlds to conquer. Even the wholly proper duty of self-culture and the equally proper virtue of self-reliance have, for religion, only an intermediate validity, and, if they are made ends in themselves, tend to degenerate into vices. Religion proposes the practice of self-denial as the only pathway to peace. East and West, Buddhist, Hindu, Confucianist, Christian—all tell the same story. The classical teaching of Jesus is not unique; it is one with the spiritual wisdom of the race. If we are ever to find ourselves we must first lose ourselves.

The *Theologia Germanica* is an elaboration of this doctrine. It begins with a blunt description of the difficulties created for us by the fact of self. Midway in his argument the author pauses to say, "Behold, one or two words can utter all that hath been said by these many words, 'Be simply and wholly bereft of self.'" This is all that the *Theologia* has to tell us, but it is an uncompromising all.

We probably owe our acquaintance with the *Theologia Germanica* to Martin Luther. He had read it and was deeply moved by it while he was still an Augustinian monk in the Roman Church. He rescued it from what would certainly have been general neglect and what might have been oblivion by publishing an edition in

1516. Two years later, after his break with Rome, he put out a second edition and gave it, in a preface, the seal of his Protestant approval. "Next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no book hath ever come into my hands, whence I have learnt or would wish to learn more of what God, Christ, and man and all things are." With such an imprimatur the work could not fail of a public, the more so since Luther sponsored fifteen further editions in his later years. Its association with Luther's name has had the effect of removing the book from the world of Catholicism in which it was born and has tended to restrict its currency, since the Reformation, to Protestant circles.

This little classic is in many ways the simplest and most striking witness we have to the mystical movements of the Middle Ages. It raises by inference, if not directly, all the theological, psychological, and moral problems which attend mysticism. For example, it reaffirms the statement of certain of the earlier Fathers of the Church that Christ and his religion aim to "deify" us. That bold term has frightened more than one cautious theologian, but neither our author nor his fellow mystics were deterred in their use of it by a prudential timidity. Furthermore, mysticism habitually lives in dubious borderlands where theism may easily pass over into pantheism, or moral liberty lapse into license. Not a few of the more extreme mystics of the Middle Ages were declared heretical and most of them were regarded as theologically suspicious characters. Their cause was not helped by occasional fanatics who perversely became libertines for conscience' sake.

The *Theologia* must be read, therefore, as the product of a movement and as typical of a cult literature. It derived from a company of pre-Reformation enthusiasts who were known as "The Friends of God." This group was widespread in Germany during the fourteenth century and our book was probably written in the middle or latter half of that century. The Friends of God never became a schismatic sect or a formal religious order. They had many affinities with other kindred groups which either broke away from the Church or crystallized into monastic communities within the Church, as was the case with the Little Poor Men of Assisi and the Brethren of the Common Life. Their unorganized society was loosely composed of persons, both clergy and laity, who were at once less ecclesiastical and more religious than the conventions of the day required. They were not aggressively heretical, but they were indifferently orthodox.

The times were troubled. The Babylonish Captivity of the Church, with a pope at Avignon, lasted from 1309 to 1377, and was immediately followed by the Great Schism, which imposed a dual papacy upon Christendom from 1378 until 1417. For over a hundred years, therefore, the official voice of Christendom in the West was either muted or ambiguous. Christians were thrown upon their own resources and had to take the cure of their souls into their own hands. The Black Death ravaged Europe three times in the middle of the fourteenth century, decimating and terrorizing the population. In 1356 a violent earthquake shook the whole Rhineland and all but wrecked the city of Basle. A general sense of

insecurity and an uneasy premonition of tribulations still to come were abroad in the land. Men were moved by a desire to put their spiritual treasure beyond the chances, changes, and corruptions of an evil time.

It is against this background that the Friends of God come upon the scene. The suggestion is that of men variously devout, sincere, and fanatical. At the centre of their informal life stood some of the most austere souls whom Christianity has ever known—Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroek. Prominent among them was a certain Rulman Merswin, who had a mysterious “Friend of God in the Oberland,” whose oracles he communicated to the movement as a whole. This elusive figure has never been identified. We are, indeed, in doubt whether there ever was any such person. He may well have been an ideal creation—like Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Or it is possible that Merswin was himself a dual personality and that his mysterious friend was his own pathological alter ego.

Meanwhile this elusive “Friend of God in the Oberland,” who exercised such a powerful influence upon these men, is of interest to us since he was the shadowy incarnation of an ideal which was highly approved by all, that of anonymity. It is true that Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroek, and Merswin were not able to hide their identities, or permanently to dissociate their names from their works. The author of the *Theologia* succeeded where they failed, and is in this respect a more faithful exemplar of the aim of the Friends of God than are his better-known companions. He has written a striking book, and for that very reason his achievement of an impenetrable anonym-

ity piques us. We ought to be able to find out who he was. We are annoyed that he still eludes us. We are in the position of the vexed critic in *Fanny's First Play*—how can we know whether it is good until we know who wrote it! This unknown mediæval Christian smiles in his security at our dilemma, and challenges us to have the courage to judge his work on its merits.

Until the middle of the last century we had only Luther's editions of the book. In 1850 a manuscript was discovered which says that the author "was of the Teutonic order, a priest and warden in the house of the Teutonic order in Frankfort." The suggestion is that of a type common at the time—a man of substance and affairs who had put the world away for Christ's sake. Plainly he had healed himself of what he regarded as man's major misery, the ill of selfhood, and his book practises what it preaches, an utter selflessness. Had he allowed his name to become identified with it he would patently have failed in his main contention, "Be simply and wholly bereft of self."

The formal anonymity of the *Theologia* is inevitably reflected in its literary style. This man has no particular private story to tell and makes no personal appeal. The work has certain verbal hallmarks, but these can hardly be described as idiosyncrasies. If it be true that "the style is the man," the book is almost without style. In place of the individual qualities which we identify in the work of most authors there is a studied neutrality. The composition as a whole reminds us of a mathematical formula, or of the most abstract music. There is no attempt to stir our feelings and only an occasional appeal

to our imagination. There is little elaboration of the argument and much repetition, even to the point of tedium. At the most the work allows itself an occasional swift and penetrating epigram. For the rest we have a series of dogmatic propositions, advanced and constantly reaffirmed in an almost bald simplicity. The truth of these propositions is apparently assumed to be self-evident, and the sentences follow like the blows of a hammer on an anvil:

All that in Adam fell and died, was raised again and made alive in Christ, and all that rose up and was made alive in Adam, fell and died in Christ. But what was that? I answer, true obedience and disobedience. But what is true obedience? I answer, that a man should stand so free, being quit of himself, that is, of his I, and Me, and Self, and the like, that in all things he should no more seek, or regard himself, than if he did not exist, and should take as little account of himself as if he were not, and another had done all his works. Likewise he should count all the creatures for nothing. What is there, then, which is, and which we may count for something? I answer, nothing but that which we may call God. CH. XV

We must concede the fitness of the style to the thought, for we have in the *Theologia Germanica* an impersonal presentation of the Christian life required by the ideal of selflessness. It is as though this mediæval mystic were following a rule laid down by one of our moderns, "If you write anything which you think is particularly fine, strike it out!" Fine writing would have had about it some hint of self-display, and mystics aspire to what Thomas Huxley once called "the passionless impersonality of the unknown and the unknowable." Because

that phrase was coined by a militant scientific unbeliever we take fright at it. But had we found it in some mystical treatise of the Middle Ages we should have accepted it as a deep wisdom and tried to plumb its depths. We might have found it there, for men like Tauler and Suso believed in the passionless impersonality of the unknown and the unknowable, and sought to celebrate it. They had a hundred ways of saying what they assured us in advance could not be said, since "in the secret deep abyss of the Divine" there is "neither thought, nor exercise of power, nor the works of virtue," but only "silence reigning over all things." Every mystic of that time sought to make his solitary way into "the wilderness of the Godhead" shrouded in "the Cloud of Un-knowing." Why should we blame in Huxley what we praise in Tauler; and why should we reprobate in modern science that passionless impersonality which we profess to admire in mediæval mysticism?

The *Theologia Germanica* is, therefore, a question mark set against one of the chief verbal idols of our day—personality. Every age has its own forms of idolatry, but whereas primitive man bowed down to sticks and stones, our time worships words. There is a point in the history of every hard-worked word at which it is in danger of ceasing to be a vehicle for thought and of becoming a device for the evasion of thought. One is sometimes tempted to conclude that the word "personality" has now come to such pass. We have cast our modern religious lot with the meanings and fortunes of that one word. We say that God is a person who is primarily concerned with personal values in the universe. Are we so



certain of the connotation of words that we can ask this single word to bear so great a weight? Can we impute to our modern vocabulary an infallible precision which a critical candor has compelled us to deny to ancient vocabularies? Controversies about the "person" of Christ rent the Christian Church in the fourth and fifth centuries. It usually turned out that the disputants were talking about different things because they were disagreed as to what constitutes a person. In one culture a "person" was a play actor who wore a mask; in another he was a property owner. Was Jesus an actor wearing the mask of humanity, or a property holder in deity? These questions seem to us crude and irrelevant.

But are we better placed to-day? What makes a man a person, and of what does his personality consist? We never meet personality in the abstract; we meet persons only as individuals. Theoretically the word "personality" should be of a more universal order than the word "individuality"; yet in practice the two tend to coalesce, and personality is forever in process of disintegrating into the prodigal varieties of human individuality. Yet an individual may be regarded as an unstable and imperfect complex of instincts, with a thin strain of continuing self-consciousness running as a single thread through the most variegated history. God cannot be one more individual like ourselves; yet how to imagine his personality in terms other than those of individual experience baffles our pious wit. Meanwhile, few of us would feel religiously satisfied, or fit for heaven, were our individual lives to be arrested in their present state and perpetuated through all eternity as they now are.

That, it has been pointed out, is the Buddhist idea of hell! We observe, furthermore, in daily life that the greater the occasion which we are celebrating the more impersonal must be the vehicle by which it is recognized. There are some experiences in life of which we can only say that they point beyond individuality, and lacking any accurate apparatus for symbolizing such an idea we make use of an impersonal act. Witness the music of Bach. Now the art of the *Theologia Germanica* is of this kind, non-individual and impersonal. It can therefore serve certain seasons and tempers of the spiritual life for which the ordinary words which have to do with individual experience are inadequate. All this is intimated, rather than stated, in the style of the *Theologia*.

I have said that the style is dogmatic, as well as impersonal, and the implications of this statement call for a further word of comment. The sentences of the *Theologia* follow each other abruptly and bluntly. There is no attempt to make them more plausible by elaboration or more appealing by the use of what Newman once called "legitimate rhetoric." This nameless man was intent merely to announce what is so; we may take it or leave it. He was in precisely the position which the Lord assigned to Ezekiel—he was set as a watchman to tell what he saw; once he had spoken the blood of the willfully deaf would be on their own heads. He would have discharged his duty and saved his soul in a bare announcement of truth.

All this is very remote from our modern idea of what religious truth is and how it is proved true. To-day we throw the burden of proof upon the believer himself. In

a familiar passage, wholly characteristic of modern Christian thinking, Robert Browning asks:

*"What think ye of Christ," friend? when all's  
done and said,  
Like you this Christianity or not?  
It may be false, but will you wish it true?  
Has it your vote to be so if it can?*

There is no doubt that casting your vote for a religious idea makes it subjectively more true for you than otherwise it could have been. But a purely subjective test is a precarious foundation on which to rest a great religion. Suppose the majority of the electorate were to vote against religion; what then? Are we condemned to be thereafter the dauntless soldiers of a forlorn hope? Plainly religion ought to rest on some foundation more stable than the fickle suffrage of men. Emily Brontë's "Last Lines" must be nearer the truth of what we conceive a religion to be:

*Though earth and man were gone,  
And suns and universes cease to be,  
And Thou were left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.*

I have allowed myself this digression because it helps us to understand the implications of the impersonal and dogmatic tone of the *Theologia Germanica*. This unknown writer is neither arguing with us nor pleading with us; he is describing what he believes to be objective realities. His anonymity gives to his words something of the passionless quality of a major fact in nature. He believes, and therefore would have us believe, that the spiritual principles he enunciates are as certain as those which

ensure the course of "Arcturus and his sons." We may not always agree with this nameless mystic of the fourteenth century, but having met him we never forget him, and once we have read him cannot ignore him.

Let us turn, then, to his first thesis—the cause of all our ills is the unsolved problem of the self.

What did the devil do else, or what was his going astray and his fall else, but that he claimed for himself to be somewhat, and would have it that somewhat was his, and somewhat was due to him? This setting up of a claim and his I and Me and Mine, these were his going astray and his fall. CH. II

What else did Adam do but this same thing? It is said, it was because Adam ate the apple that he was lost, or fell. I say, it was because of his claiming something for his own, and because of his I, Mine, Me, and the like. Had he eaten seven apples, and yet never claimed anything for his own, he would not have fallen: but as soon as he called something his own, he fell, and would have fallen if he had never touched an apple. CH. III

Because I count myself to be my own, and say, "I," "Mine," "Me," and the like, God is hindered so that He cannot do His work in me . . . for this cause my fall and my going astray remain unhealed. Behold! all this cometh of my claiming somewhat for my own. CH. III

The self, for the author of the *Theologia*, is not an abstraction or a complex of instincts. The self expresses itself most characteristically as will, and for the purposes of his argument is the will. Sin is self-will, and salvation is the negation of self-will, indeed its utter annihilation. Upon this text he is explicit:

The more a man followeth after his own self-will, and self-will groweth in him, the farther off he is from God,

the true Good, for nothing burneth in hell but self-will.

CH. XXXIV

That metaphor of self-will as the fuel of hell is one of the boldest sayings in the book. It points the way to a further simplification or sophistication of its theology. Heaven and hell are not places, nor are they dates in the future; they are present states of our own soul, they are within us. The *Theologia*, with the substitution of the word "will" for "mind," would agree with *Paradise Lost* that

*The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.*

Our mystic goes on to elaborate his doctrine of hell and heaven. Heaven and hell are states of mind, modes of being, adjustments of the will which we are forever immediately experiencing. We are, at any given moment of our lives, necessarily in the one or the other. So automatic are the operations of the spiritual order that we may pass instantly and totally from one to another. If you call anything your own you are in hell; if there is nothing which you call your own you are in heaven. Read his account of these things:

Were there no self-will there would be also no ownership. In heaven there is no ownership. . . . If any one took upon him to call anything his own, he would straightway be thrust out into hell, and would become an evil spirit. . . . But if there were one in hell who should get quit of his self-will and call nothing his own, he would come out of hell into heaven. Now, in this present time, man is set between heaven and hell, and may turn himself towards which he will. For the more he hath of ownership, the more he hath of hell and

misery; and the less of self-will, the less of hell, and the nearer he is to the Kingdom of God. And could a man, while on earth, be wholly quit of self-will and ownership, and stand up free . . . he would be sure of the Kingdom of God. CH. LI

The *Theologia* has an ingenious solution of the problem of determinism and free will, probably too ingenious to be true. Our self-seeking and self-will, it says, are to be given over to God, "except in so far as they are necessary to make up a person." Apparently we have and always keep the will power to renounce self-will. The result of this renunciation is not the destruction of the will, but the release of the only free will which there is in the universe, God's will. Because God made the will in man, that will is as truly God's as is the Eternal Will itself. It is only when man calls his own what is God's that he loses free will. If he can recognize his will as God's will and allow God to exercise his own divine will, then all is well, and man wills only what God wills. The will is free so long as it is left to God; it loses its freedom only when it is claimed by the human self. Therefore,

Whoso robbeth the will of its noble freedom and maketh it his own, must of necessity as his reward be laden with cares and troubles, with discontent, disquiet, and all manner of wretchedness, and this will remain and endure in time and in eternity. But he who leaveth the will in its freedom hath content, and peace, rest and blessedness in time and in eternity. CH. LI

This is an arbitrary treatment of a very difficult matter. It is characteristically mystical, yet none the less perplexing on that account. The passages in the *Theologia* which juggle the recurring references to self-will

and God's will with such dexterous skill are so apt to fascinate us by the trick of their wording that they hypnotize us. Yet when you think about these bald descriptions of sin and salvation you suspect that they are too simple. And when our author applies his theory of free will to the person of Christ you realize that, technically, he lapsed into more than one of the positions which a thousand years earlier the Church had declared heretical. Meanwhile, in this man's world there is but one will—God's. If we leave it as God gave it to us it works as his will, but if we treat it as though it were our own, and call it ours, everything goes wrong. There are not two wills to be brought into harmony; there is only one will, which we may leave to God, whose it is, or may wrongfully preëempt for ourselves.

If we state this issue in its initial terms as that of God and man, the account which we have of the religious life is altogether too mechanical. One is made to feel as though he were the keeper of a lock on some river. There is, as it were, an upper level above him which is God and grace and heaven; a lower level below which is the Devil and sin and hell; midway between the two levels is the lock which is our life. The Christian lock keeper will open the gates downriver and empty the self of what is in it; then he will close those gates and open the gates upriver until his lock is level with the stream above. Should he ever say, "The water which came down the stream and is now in the lock is mine," the upstream gates would automatically close, and the downstream gates would open, and the water in the lock which once was God's would become the Devil's

and go down to hell, because the lock keeper in an ill-starred moment dared to call it his own. The whole transaction seems as mechanical as that.

Two comments must be made upon this exceedingly arbitrary interpretation of the religious life, since it carries with it theoretical difficulties and practical dangers. This man's moral and spiritual strategy does not conform to what is, I think, the maturest wisdom of the Christian religion. Christianity believes in what has been called "the expulsive power of a new affection." All that is problematical and unlovely in the self is to be dispossessed, either suddenly or gradually, by something which comes to mean more to us than self. Sin is conquered, not by a frontal attack, but by a flank attack; it is dislodged from behind. The *Theologia*, on the other hand, attacks the problem of the self directly and proposes first of all to make the self empty, trusting some principle of the vacuum to draw God in. It is a fair question, psychologically and morally, whether the self can ever be finally vacated by direct action such as is here proposed. We may go far in that direction, but there is a point beyond which nature does not allow us to go. You cannot successfully say, "I must remember to forget myself," since the remembrance is itself a denial of the would-be forgetfulness. Excessive violence to self-consciousness takes revenge upon us in the form of mental disorder and we are more likely to find ourselves patients in an insane asylum than citizens of heaven.

In short, this man seems never to have read the parable of the house swept and garnished, or, if he had read it, to have ignored it. In this respect he does not



run true to the form of conventional mysticism, for all the classical mystics know that if you merely empty self of the devil who is living there and do no more, seven devils worse than the first will come in and take up their abode. Therefore, the standard manuals of mystical regimen have had to provide an apparatus by which you may satisfy yourself whether the resident spirit in you is from God or Satan. Satan, as mystics had learned only too well, has a way of dressing himself up in the most pious and plausible disguises.

There is only one sentence in the *Theologia* which seems to recognize this peril, and even that sentence is open to other interpretations. "All deception beginneth in self-deception." This is a magnificent epigram which possibly should tell its own story. Perhaps the writer thought that he was addressing wise men and that a word to the wise was sufficient. But it is hardly a safeguard against the particular type of peril to which mysticism is always liable, that of an ethically fatal fall. The authentic mystics are like skilled mountain climbers. They are morally sure-footed and on the steepest slopes of their most daring ascents they never slip. But the history of such movements is filled with records of casualties among would-be mystics who proved lightheaded and slipshod. It is with the history of mysticism as with any great mountain. There is a tradition of gallant climbs; but there is also a cemetery at the base, with a sobering record of those who came to grief because of carelessness or overconfidence. The *Theologia*, unlike most manuals of mysticism, is wanting in any considerable instruction for morally less competent souls. The daring austerity

of its argument will not always be understood by those who are unfamiliar with the terrain, and its deceptive simplicity lays it open to abuse.

We find, then, that at certain points the *Theologia Germanica* must be read, if not with reservations, certainly with supplementary reflections. This man was not, as was Saint Augustine, an instinctively quick observer of the ways in which the human mind and heart work. He was a doctrinaire thinker, who made a bold and simple pattern, and then expected the facts to conform to it. His psychology is elementary and his moral regimen not without its inherent dangers. But if these reflections must be debited against him, our account with him must be balanced in his favor by a final generous entry to his credit. The man's heart was right and the desire which sustained his life is expressed in one of the most familiar and beautiful aspirations of all mysticism. Spiritually mature men, he tells us,

commit and commend themselves and all things to the Eternal Goodness. Nevertheless, there remaineth in them a desire to go forward and get nearer the Eternal Goodness: that is to come to a clearer knowledge, and warmer love, and more comfortable assurance, and perfect obedience and subjection; so that every enlightened man could say: "I would fain be to the Eternal Goodness, what his own hand is to a man." CH. X

That last sentence is the heart of the *Theologia Germanica*. The physiology and psychology used to elaborate the metaphor may be crude; the intention is pure. The author of the *Theologia* must have lived the active rather than the contemplative life. The moral struggle was real

to him and no one can challenge his major premise—that selfishness is the root of sin. Now a great deal of what the world calls religion is a subtle form of selfishness. We seek either the sweetness of the religious emotions or divine help for our private projects. One remembers the candid prayer of the Covenanter, “O God, we beseech thee to guide us aright, for we are very determined!” As religions mature they are progressively purged of a residual magical content, inherited from their primitive origins. Magic is the attempt to coerce the supernatural in our own behalf, to deify self-will. Mysticism stands at the opposite pole, as an endeavor to find out what God’s will is and to give that will its own way in and with us. The *Theologia* is, at this point, the least magical and the most mystical book imaginable. Its author has no slightest interest in persuading God to strengthen his hand; he wishes only to become a hand for God to use. The name of the group to which he belonged had been, indeed, deliberately chosen with this thought in mind. Its members had appealed to the verse in the Fourth Gospel in which Christ says, “No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends.” To be a Friend of God was to put away all thought of service for reward, and to love God for his own sake.

It is told of Saint Louis that on one of the Crusades he met an Arab woman in the streets of Damascus, who was carrying a jug of water in one hand and a lighted torch in the other. He asked her what she was doing, and she said that she was going to put out the fires of hell and to burn up the joys of heaven that men might love God for his own sake. That motif runs through all me-

diæval mysticism, and is one of the strains by which we identify it. The *Theologia Germanica* is the work of a man who had put far behind him all calculating care about religion's rewards and punishments. The religious life has its rewards, but for this author they were results which he noted after the event, not motives which determined his action in advance. The world being what it is, we cannot get quit of rewards and punishments, but, as our author knew, it makes all the difference whether they are treated as cause or effect.

Within the accepted framework of formal religion, he tells us, we find four kinds of men. There are those who serve God without heart in the act because they are afraid to do otherwise. There are those who serve God for the sake of the reward they expect to get. There are those who think they have become so perfect that they may do as they like and break all laws. And finally there are those who serve God solely because they love him. The *Theologia* is a summons to outgrow the first and second classes, a warning to shun the third class, and a challenge to grow up to the fourth class.

For a lover of God is better and dearer to Him than a hundred thousand hirelings. CH. XXXIX

It is here that we seem to see this sure-footed mystic coming out on the summit of the spiritual ascent. The task which he set himself was a practical rather than a theoretical one: to find a way of life of which his conscience could approve and a motive to sustain him in living that life. This he found in his deepening conviction that growing up to the fullness of the stature of

Christ is a matter of unlearning the calculating habits of a hireling because one discovers the joy of being a friend.

In one of the later passages of the *Theologia* we hear the conclusion of the whole matter:

This is our answer to the question, "If a man by putting on Christ's life, can get nothing more than he hath already, and serve no end, what good will it do him?" This life is not chosen in order to serve any end, or to get anything by it, but for love of its nobleness, and because God loveth and esteemeth it so greatly. . . . He who hath put on the life of Christ with the intent to win or deserve ought thereby, hath taken it up as an hireling and not for love, and is altogether without it. For he who doth not take it up for love, hath none of it at all; he may dream indeed that he hath put it on, but he is deceived. Christ did not lead such a life as His for sake of reward, but out of love. . . . To him who hath not put it on from love, but hath done so, as he dreameth, for the sake of reward, it is utterly bitter and a weariness, and he would fain be quit of it. And it is a sure token of an hireling that he wisheth his work were at an end. But he who truly loveth it, is not offended at its toil or suffering, nor the length of time it lasteth. . . . It is the same with all virtue, and good works, and likewise with order, laws, obedience to precepts, and the like. But God rejoiceth more over one man who truly loveth, than over a thousand hirelings. CH. XXXVIII

The *Theologia Germanica* lives on by its fine fidelity to what is known in the literature of mediæval mysticism as "the unmercenary love of God." That idea or ideal is like the primeval granite; often it is covered up by other formations, sometimes buried deep from sight, yet again and again it crops out on the surface, and is al-

ways uniform whenever and wherever we find it. As it stands, the *Theologia* belongs to the Middle Ages. We must not ask or expect of it too much modernity. It is, as we have seen, at certain points archaic, imperfect, and perhaps open to serious misconstruction. But though we may forget most of it, let us remember its three or four greatest sayings:

Be simply and wholly bereft of self.

Nothing burneth in hell but self-will.

All deception beginneth in self-deception.

I would fain be to the Eternal Goodness what his own hand is to a man.

And then let us realize that, in his final emphasis upon the unmercenary love of God, the unknown author of this work has fastened upon the one most precious bequest of mediæval mysticism to modern times. Curiously enough, after a century of aggressive self-assertion, men are now turning to this neglected and almost forgotten ideal as still having in its keeping the lost secret of the things which belong to our peace. I conclude with a passage from a recent book, written in the spirit and even the style of the *Theologia*.

It is difficult to find a single word which will adequately describe the ideal man of the free philosophers and the founders of religions. "Non-attached" is perhaps the best. The ideal man is the non-attached man. Non-attached to his bodily sensations and lusts. Non-attached to his craving for power and possessions. Non-attached to the objects of these various desires. Non-attached to his anger and hatred; non-attached to his exclusive loves. Non-attached to wealth, fame, social

position. Non-attached even to these. For like patriotism, in Nurse Cavell's phrase, "They are not enough." Non-attachment to self . . . with attachment to an ultimate reality greater and more significant than the self. Greater and more significant than even the best things that this world has to offer.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ends and Means*, by Aldous Huxley. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1937, p. 4.





CHAPTER V  
*THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD*  
*BY BROTHER LAWRENCE*

FOURTH CONVERSATION, NOVEMBER 25TH, 1667

*He discoursed to me very fervently and with great openness of heart, concerning his manner of going to GOD, whereof some part is related already.*

*He told me, that all consists in one hearty renunciation of everything which we are sensible does not lead us to GOD, in order that we may accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him, without mystery and in simplicity. . . .*

*That the most excellent method which he had found of going to GOD, was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men, and (as far as we are capable) purely for the love of GOD.*

*That it was a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times: that we were as strictly obliged to adhere to GOD by action in the time of action as by prayer in its season.*

*That his view of prayer was nothing else but a sense of the Presence of GOD, his soul being at that time insensible to everything but the Divine Love. That when the appointed time of prayer were passed, he found no difference, because he still continued with GOD, praising and blessing Him with all his might. . . .*

*That when he had thus in prayer filled his mind full with great sentiments of that INFINITE BEING, he went to his work appointed in the kitchen (for he was cook to the Society); there, having first considered severally the things his office required, and when and how each thing was to be done, he spent all the intervals of his time, as well before as after his work, in prayer. THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD*

## Chapter 6

### THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

BY BROTHER LAWRENCE

**T**HE religions of the world always have a simple story to tell. Their simplicity is achieved in one of two ways, either by a gradual diminution of man's desire or by the subjection of his many desires to a single controlling purpose. The East has tended to follow the former method, the West the latter.

*The Practice of the Presence of God* is the transcript of a simple life. It is a memoir of an otherwise obscure lay brother who lived in a religious house in Paris some two hundred and fifty years ago. Its bulk is slight and the sum of the works bearing the name of "Brother Lawrence" yields a booklet shorter than any of the Gospels. Yet, as with the person of Jesus, we are left with a clear impression of a sharply defined character.

The Preface to the Original Edition of 1692 says:

Although death has carried off last year many of the Order of the Carmelites Déchaussés, brethren who have left in dying rare legacies of lives of virtue, Providence, it would seem, has desired that the eyes of men should chiefly be cast on Brother Lawrence. . . .

All Christians will find herein much that is edifying. Those in the thick of the great world will learn from these letters how greatly they deceive themselves, seeking for peace and joy in the false glitter of the things that are seen, yet temporal; those who are seeking the Highest Good will gain from this book strength to persevere in the practice of virtue. All, whatever their life-work, will find profit, for they will see herein a brother, busied

as they are in outward affairs, who in the midst of exacting occupations, has learnt so well to accord action with contemplation, that for the space of more than forty years he hardly ever turned from the Presence of God.

The story of Brother Lawrence's life and his remembered words are an example of "the simplicity that is in Christ." Christians in general have been agreed as to the nature of that simplicity. It is the winning of some "central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation," a peace which is achieved by a rigorous ordering of our desires rather than by their ruthless negation. The task of unifying life takes various forms. It is in the first instance an endeavor to bring the body into subjection to the spirit. Fleshly lusts in our members war one against another, and all together unite to war against the spirit. Such metaphors are a commonplace in the New Testament. It is the office of the spirit to suppress the wars of secession which the body wages against the soul. What the spirit does and what it leaves undone are alike prompted by its determination to save the union of soul and body in a single Christian character.

The conflict takes on a graver form when it gives rise to painfully felt differences as to faith and practice. We are agreed in principle that we ought to accept the truth and to do what is right. Yet in many a concrete instance it is hard to know where the truth lies and what the right is. Perhaps that is the reason why the wars of religion have been so bloody, so long, and so inconclusive.

The awareness of a tension within religion itself is particularly vivid when we meet it as the antithesis be-

tween prayer and work. Here is a point at which good men differ in their emphasis, precisely because they are, by nature, differently constituted. The issue was dramatically stated when Mary and Martha, the one with her still devotion and the other with her solicitous care, sought to serve Jesus. In the literature of Christian piety Mary and Martha have lived on as personifications of the distinction between the contemplative and the active life. The *Ancren Riwele*, a thirteenth-century manual for English nuns, says, "Martha hath her own office; let her alone and sit ye stone-still at God's feet. . . . Mary ought not to intermeddle with it"; the two types are happiest and most effective when kept apart, they had best not try to live under the same roof. On the other hand, Saint Teresa was irked by this schism and sought to reconcile the two. She told her nuns in Spain that "to give our Lord perfect hospitality Mary and Martha must combine," since the aim and end of prayer is "the incessant production of works, works."

The eighteenth century tried to solve such issues by appealing to an elemental and undifferentiated nature, supposedly one and the same in all men. It said that the distinctions within humanity, which give us so much trouble, are imposed upon us by mistaken observers or officious intermeddlers, by statesmen and churchmen and moralists. Call off the scientists and philosophers, the kings and priests, and man will abandon the needless ghostly warfares which he fights with himself, and the equally useless warfares which he fights with his neighbor. The proverbial wisdom of modern democracies still repeats platitudes to this intent. A man's a man for all

that; all men are born equal; one man is as good as another. Lord Bryce said that this eighteenth-century perfectionist view of human nature had not been, until that time, held by any reputable thinker of the first rank.

The dogma of a single consistent human stuff is no longer widely held. The now current theories as to our nature are proving to be, in unexpected ways, secular restatements of traditional theological formulas. The sciences which deal with man's mind and body are making us freshly aware of secessionists within who, left to their own devices, will do us irreparable harm. The "integration of personality" is to-day a recognized duty to which psychology earnestly summons us, but that phrase is merely our labored modern way of saying what religion has always said more simply, "Let thine eye be single."

In particular, Mary and Martha now reappear in the guise of the introvert and the extravert. Much of the new psychology is very like the old theology in modern dress, and even though the dress be modern we do not fail to discern the traditional doctrines. For Jung the Mary-Martha category is a stubborn datum rather than a needless sophistication, which furnishes us with our first and possibly our best passkey to an understanding of ourselves and others. Some persons are predominantly inward-minded, others are outward-minded. We seem to be back where we started, and the latest secular techniques are still as helpless to resolve the antithesis as were primitive Christianity and mediæval piety.

The Middle Ages played with the idea that Mary and

Martha are one and the same, and that the courage to say so might effect their reconciliation. Mediæval manuals of devotion revived and repeated certain phrases which were used by Saint Bernard: *Laborare est orare; orare est laborare; qui laborat orat*—"To work is to pray; to pray is to work; he who works prays." Theoretically this may be the case; practically the vindication of these equations in life has been rare. It is at this point that Brother Lawrence crosses our horizon to share in our attempts to understand and to achieve the simple life.

The major, if not the sole, interest of *The Practice of the Presence of God* lies in its repeated affirmation that prayer and work are one and the same. Here, apparently, was a man who had successfully overcome the antithesis which had vexed so many centuries and who had unified the religious life at the precise point where unification had traditionally proved most difficult. If we take Brother Lawrence at his word, and we have no reason to do otherwise, to pray was with him to work, and to work was to pray. His own statement is explicit:

The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity, as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.

This statement is one of the most familiar and provocative passages in the whole body of Christian literature. It has the advantage of being disarmingly concrete, and the bold contrast between the noise and clatter of the kitchen and the silence of the Sacrament kindles the imagination. Did this man have, somehow,

a daring wit which the rest of us lack, to make a truce and peace between those ancient rivals, the world within and the world without? That is our question.

His religious name, Brother Lawrence, was given to one Nicholas Herman, who was born in the early part of the seventeenth century in the French province of Lorraine. He came of plain people and was to the end an unlettered man with no pretensions to book learning. In youth and middle life he had been first a soldier and then a household servant. In 1666 he entered the monastery of the Barefooted Carmelites in Paris as a lay brother and there he lived and worked in the kitchen for the last twenty-five years of his life, until his death in 1691, at the age of eighty. He was, to use a phrase usually reserved for one higher than himself, "a servant of the servants of God." His tasks in the Carmelite house were always practical and usually menial. Yet he did his homely duties with such radiant grace that unwittingly he became, by common consent, the unofficial spiritual superior of his monastery.

We have from him a few letters, usually appended to the book which bears his name. As for other writing, he occasionally put his thoughts down on paper, and certain of his reflections are preserved in a brief manuscript of "Maxims" found among his effects. For the remainder of our knowledge we are dependent upon the record of four conversations held with him not long after his admission to the Carmelites, and upon a memoir of his character and teaching, written two years after his death by Beaufort, Grand Vicar to the Cardinal de Noailles. As in the case of the higher clergy who defended Saint



Francis before the College of Cardinals, it says much for the Roman Church in the person of this French Grand Vicar that, in spite of its preoccupation with what might well have seemed greater affairs, it did not allow the character of this lowly man to pass unidentified and uncelebrated. Both the Carmelites and the Grand Vicar recognized, even then, the beauty of holiness in this lay brother of the kitchen.

The monastery has often been, and will quite as often be again, a refuge for tired men who seek respite from the tedium and troubles of life in the world. Brother Lawrence was a man well past mid-life when he knocked at the door of the Carmelite house for admission. Of the seven ages of man the greater part lay behind him, but it was not sanctuary he sought. In his first conversation he told his interlocutor

that he had been footman for M. Fieubert, the treasurer, and that he was a great awkward fellow, who broke everything.

That he had desired to be received into a monastery, thinking that he would there be made to smart for his awkwardness, and the faults he should commit.

There is something very fine in the sight of this forthright man of fifty getting resolutely on with the task of self-discipline at a time of life when most men have abandoned the struggle to keep the soul alive and have made a moral truce with their defects. Brother Lawrence rings true; there is no flaw in him and therefore no false note in what he said or did; no world-weariness which suggests a spent soul.

What most impressed his contemporaries, and what

shines through the record, was a matter-of-factness which is not usually associated with monasticism, much less with spirituality. Brother Lawrence was eminently practical. The Grand Vicar tells us that

what he said was very simple, but to the point and full of sense. Behind a rather rough exterior, one found a singular sagacity. . . . As a man of affairs he was capable of carrying through the greatest matters, and of giving wise and safe counsel.

There was, then, about Brother Lawrence no affectation of thin and saccharine virtues. His goodness was salty. His temper and tone seem more like Anglo-Saxon piety than Latin mysticism. He realized that we live in a world where, so long as we have bodies, they must be cared for. The menial duties required for that care may be realistically accepted as a proper part of the religious life and discharged accordingly, or they may be airily dismissed as beneath the dignity of religion and therefore handed over to Satan. Brother Lawrence construed his life in the former terms. He tells us, for example,

that he had lately been sent into Burgundy to buy the provision of wine for the society, which was a very unwelcome task to him, because he had no turn for business, and because he was lame and could not go about the boat, but by rolling himself over the casks. That, however, he gave himself no uneasiness about it, nor about the purchase of the wine. That he said to God, *It was His business he was about*; and that afterwards he found it very well performed. That he had been sent to Auvergne the year before upon the same account; but that he could not tell how the matter passed, but that it proved very well.

What captivates us about the man is his candor, and his utter lack of anything approaching sentimentality. He not only hated to go on those occasional business trips, he disliked his routine cooking and washing dishes. The actual words are unequivocal; they speak of "his business in the kitchen, to which he naturally had a great aversion." There is moreover a disarming honesty in his statement that he got little satisfaction from set periods of prayer, and often found them dull and dry. Much of the difficulty which religion meets in its address to the world derives from a lack of precisely such blunt sincerity. The captain of our salvation was, it is true, made in all things like unto his brethren, and the Gospels are honest. But too many conventional Christians seem to have entered into a conspiracy of pretense or silence—pretense as to an enjoyment of unabated pleasures in religion and silence as to any spiritual pains or perplexities. The experiences of which they speak seem too good to be true, or at least so good as to be beyond our powers. In their presence we are therefore forced to conclude that God endows men differently, and that if we are not among those whom he has elected and equipped for the raptures of saintliness, we are exempted from attempting its ardors. It is rather like being turned down in a draft for the army because of short sight or flat feet. You are excused from fighting, but you can still keep your self-respect, since no reflection is cast on your character. You are not to blame if God has not given you a taste for spiritual things.

Now Brother Lawrence made no pretenses and if he did nothing else for us he did this: he broke the con-

spiracy of silence which surrounds certain of the problematical areas of Christian living. He would have understood what the old monk in *The Brothers Karamazov* meant when he said, "This above all, don't lie to yourself." It is reassuring to know that so gallant a soldier of Christ Jesus often found the warfare long. I once heard Canon Sanday of Christ Church tell a class that three quarters of the honest intellectual work of the world is nothing but sheer drudgery. Having made one's peace with the fact, one can do it; it is only the pretense that it is always interesting which makes such work impossible. That was Brother Lawrence's verdict upon his task; he never pretended to like all its detail, but he "got on with the job." We understand him and love him for his realistic honesty.

This does not mean, however, that his work was intolerable. On the contrary, we are told that in spite of his aversion to his business in the kitchen, "he had found everything easy during the fifteen years he had been employed there," and that "he was very well pleased with the post he was now in." How is it that a man finds easy and pleasant a task for which naturally he has a great aversion? Brother Lawrence leaves us in no doubt as to the answer.

Since I first entered the religious life, I have looked on God as the *Goal* and *End* of all the thoughts and affections of the soul.

The most excellent method . . . of going to God is that of *doing our common business* without any view of pleasing men, and (as far as we are able) *purely for the love of God*.

Possessed thus entirely with the greatness and majesty of the Infinite Being, I go straightway to the place

which duty has marked out for me—the kitchen. There, when I have carried out all that called for me, I give to prayer whatever time remains, as well before my work as after. Before beginning any task, I say to God, with childlike trust: “O God, since Thou art with me, and it is Thy will that I must now apply myself to these outward duties, I beseech Thee, assist me with Thy grace, that I may continue in Thy Presence: and to this end, O Lord, be with me in this my work, accept the labour of my hands, and dwell within my heart with all Thy fulness.”

We can do *little* things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of Him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before Him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.

Certain aspects of this utterly simple way of life deserve still closer attention. Coleridge opens his *Aids to Reflection* with a few “Introductory Aphorisms.” The second and third of the Aphorisms affirm that

there is one sure way of giving freshness and importance to the most commonplace maxims—that of reflecting on them in direct reference to our own state and conduct, to our own past and future being.

To restore a commonplace truth to its first uncommon lustre, you need only translate it into action.

Brother Lawrence knew by nature what too many of us have to learn line upon line, precept upon precept, that in religion a sense of reality is preserved only so long as there is a connection between thought and action. The uncommon lustre of *The Practice of the Presence of God* is due to its swift translation of religious convictions into conduct. The distinction between prayer and work is

not denied, but the former is forever in process of passing at once into the latter. There is little doubt that much of what a modern writer has called "the seeming unreality of the spiritual life" is due to a chronic failure to supplement the contemplative life by some deed through which we objectify it to ourselves. In want of such confirmation the world of ideas becomes thin and unsubstantial, an illusory city of refuge from reality.

In the next place Brother Lawrence never allowed himself the moral luxury of self-pity. He was not, and he did not pretend to be, a perfect man. He was, therefore, as entitled as the next man to the bitter sweetness of remorse. But he anticipated by instinct what was later said by Frederick Robertson, that "pernicious as have been the consequences of self-righteousness, more destructive still have been the consequences of remorse. If self-righteousness has slain its thousands, remorse has slain its tens of thousands." Brother Lawrence is explicit on this point. He may have been a twice-born soul, but he did not allow himself the emotional luxury of being repeatedly reborn.

Since entering upon the religious life, I no longer perplex myself with thoughts of virtue, or of my salvation.

When I fail in my duty I readily acknowledge it, saying, *I am used to do so: I shall never do otherwise, if I am left to myself.*

That . . . he had no need of a "director" to advise him. . . . That he was very sensible of his faults, but not discouraged by them: that he confessed them to God, and did not plead against Him to excuse them. When he had so done he peaceably resumed his usual practice of love and adoration.

That when he had failed in his duty, he simply confessed his fault, saying to God, *I shall never do otherwise, if Thou leavest me to myself; 'tis Thou must hinder my falling, and mend what is amiss.* That after this he gave himself no further uneasiness about it.

We have a still further example of directness of nature and character in his courageous application of the felt Presence of God to the most trivial task of the moment. The prophecy of Zechariah ends with the statement, "In that day . . . the pots in the Lord's house shall be like the bowls before the altar. Yea, every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts." His prophecy waited centuries for literal fulfillment until Brother Lawrence made the pots and pans in the kitchen of a Carmelite monastery vessels of the spirit, as were the paten and the chalice on the altar of its chapel. The theocratic ideal is, and always has been, the sanctification of the whole of life, its every tool and its every task. In practice the venture has usually worked the other way; the bowls on the altar, when they are religiously equated with the pots in the kitchen, usually lose their sanctity and the sense of the sacredness of all things fades away into the light of common day. Life becomes unified, but at the secular rather than the spiritual level. It was the distinction of Brother Lawrence that he succeeded in realizing a hope and an ideal which every prophetic religion has cherished. He gave substance to the faith professed in one of Martineau's noblest sermons:

*That a soul occupied with great ideas best performs small duties; that the divinest views of life penetrate most clearly*

into the smallest emergencies; that so far from petty principles being best proportioned to petty trials, a heavenly spirit taking up its abode with us can alone sustain well the daily toils of our condition.

Martineau defends this proposition with great ingenuity. Brother Lawrence vindicated it in fact, and over his Carmelite kitchen there rested for thirty years a veritable Shekinah.

One further detail of his regimen deserves attention. He tells us that he did all these little things—and it was little things he loved to do best—in the Presence and with the Presence of God. How did he think of two things at the same time, the Infinite God and the cake frying on the pan? One dreamer, a legendary English king, burnt the cakes because in his royal reverie he could not think of two things at the same time.

We have seen that the conventional rules of monasticism appointed four or five hours of the day for contemplation and assigned perhaps eight hours a day to manual tasks. The times for prayer and work were set apart in considerable consecutive periods. It is possible that, as a lay member of the Order, Brother Lawrence was not expected to observe rules imposed upon the religious. But whether this be so or not, he had the courage to ignore the rules and to live the Christian life in his own way. He had no spiritual “director” because he felt no need of one. He reminds us of Tauler’s statement that the holiest man he ever knew had never heard more than five sermons in his life, for when he saw how it was with him he went and did as the preacher said and thereafter needed to hear no more sermons.



Brother Lawrence admits that from time to time he "retired to pray according to the direction of his Superior; but that he did not want such times of prayer because his greatest business did not divert him from God." In place of the more formal and considerable parts of the day, given alternatively to prayer and work, he broke the hours of the conventional monastic day into minutes, both of prayer and of work, and then fitted the minutes together in a fresh mosaic. The contrast between prayer and work still survives theoretically, but practically his waking, working day rearranged them in a much smaller pattern than was the monastic custom.

Before he began any act Brother Lawrence said to God, "I cannot do this unless Thou enablest me," without having to hark back to prayers said hours before. "When outward business diverted him a little from the thought of God, a fresh remembrance coming from God invested his soul." In all this there was no strain, no self-consciousness. "We should apply ourselves unceasingly so to rule all our actions that they be little acts of communion with God; but they must not be studied, they must come naturally from the purity and simplicity of the heart." For this end no long and labored prayers are necessary—"with a little love, just a very little, we shall find it easy." Brother Lawrence would not have us suppose that he had achieved his unbroken awareness of the Presence of God without deliberate discipline. On the contrary, he tells us that he found this practice hard at first and mastered it only after long care. But having had the courage to ignore the conventions, and to live his own life, he fashioned what was for himself a perfect

rule. There is in his conversations, letters, and memoirs no slightest trace of that spiritual tedium and "dryness" which we met in the *Imitation*. The want of it, I am reasonably clear, is due in part to the reduction of the pattern of contrasted prayer and work to much briefer periods of time than are the common custom. He was liable to say his prayers at any time, and in that fact lay the secret of the serenity of his busy yet tranquil days of constant communion with God. His native courage to do an unconventional thing gave him a fresh insight into the problem of prayer and work.

We should be greatly helped in our understanding and appraisal of Brother Lawrence if we knew whether he had ever heard of Clement of Alexandria, and more particularly whether he had ever read the *Stromateis* ("Miscellanies"). Probably not; he was not the sort of person who would have been at ease in a library with a sophisticated second-century Christian father. Yet we cannot cancel out of our calculations the possibility that Clement's teaching about prayer had trickled down the centuries to well up again in the kitchen of the Carmelite house where Brother Lawrence lived.

However, while Brother Lawrence gave to his teaching on the identity of prayer and work the forceful originality of his own example, his idea was not novel. At a much earlier time Clement of Alexandria had proposed to solve what we call the problem of prayer by extending its scope and definition. Let us hark back to the first clear enunciation of the doctrine which we have thus far identified with Brother Lawrence. Clement tells us, in the *Stromateis*, that

we are bidden to worship and honour the Son and Word . . . and to honour the Father through Him, doing this not on special days, as some others do, but continuously all our life through. . . . Wherefore it is neither in a definite place or special shrine, nor yet on certain feasts and days set apart, that the gnostic honours God . . . but he will do this all his life in every place. . . . Such is he who believes that God is everywhere present, and does not suppose Him to be shut up in certain definite places. . . . Accordingly all our life is a festival: being persuaded that God is everywhere present on all sides, we praise Him as we till the ground, we sing hymns as we sail the sea, we feel His inspiration in all that we do. 35

Prayer, then, to speak somewhat boldly is converse with God. Even if we address Him in a whisper, without opening our lips, or uttering a sound, still we cry to Him in heart. 39

And if there are any who assign fixed hours to prayer, such as the third and sixth and ninth, yet the gnostic at all events prays all his life through. 40

Every place then and every time at which we entertain the thought of God is truly hallowed. 43

Accordingly the gnostic<sup>1</sup> will pray in every place, not however publicly for all to see; but in every sort of way his prayer ascends, whether he is walking or in company or at rest or reading or engaged in good works; and though it be only a thought in the secret chamber of the heart . . . yet the Father is nigh at hand before he has done speaking. 49<sup>2</sup>

Clement's words are more formal than those of Brother Lawrence, and his tone more patrician, but the ideas are identical. The problem of prayer, as unanswered

<sup>1</sup>Note that "gnostic," as used by Clement, corresponds to our word "mystic," and does not describe a member of a heretical sect.

<sup>2</sup>*Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies Book VII*; tr. by F. J. A. Hort. London, Macmillan and Company, 1902.

petition and intercession, is solved by enlarging the scope of prayer. Prayer in Clement's thought is not a request for particular things spoken in explicit words at special times and places, it is rather the whole meditative side of life opened out towards God; it is all our thoughtfulness, as devout thought governs our care for every daily duty. To this type of prayer a particular name has been given; it is known as "orison," in distinction from prayers which merely ask for specific consequences.

One hesitates, I think, to comment adversely upon the simplicity and beauty of *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Of its kind it is nearly perfect. To find fault with it is like blaming a Colonial house in New England for not being a Tudor mansion in Old England. Yet Colonial houses, however lovely in their austerity, are not the only forms of houses men may build, and they have their limitations. While leaving Brother Lawrence and his book intact we may point out, in the more remote and perhaps less attractive person of Clement of Alexandria, certain of the implications of the religious equation of prayer with work, and work with prayer.

The inclination to identify prayer and work is Greek in its genius, not Jewish. Much, if not most, of the formal theology and ethics of Christianity was elaborated in the terms of Greek thought, and in this task Clement was a pioneer. There is abroad to-day a growing conviction that Christianity has allowed its abstract Greek half to get the better of its concrete Jewish half. In any case, Clement's doctrine of prayer is that of a man who was an "intellectual." One cannot suppose that he ever had to demean himself by frying cakes on a pan or by picking

up straws from a floor, much less by trying to practise the presence of God in the noise and clatter of a kitchen. He was very much the gentleman and the scholar, and it was relatively easy for him to throw the ample mantle of his theory of prayer over the whole of life, since there is little suggestion in his writings that he was ever concerned with life's kitchen police. You can philosophize to your heart's content in a study about cooking and washing dishes, so long as you do not actually have to cook and wash up. The dignity of labor is usually most loudly celebrated by those who are not over-addicted to hard work. So with Clement's solution of the problem of prayer and work—it is too easy, too doctrinaire; it suggests the night in which all cows are black.

Conversely, and here we come closer to our proper theme, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Brother Lawrence was constitutionally incapable of understanding, much less of practising, what is commonly called the contemplative life. Nature had endowed him with a strong practical bent and an outward-turned mind. His naïve confession that he got little from "set times of prayer" and "issued with much dryness of spirit" from periods of "devotion in retirement" is an indication that he was not a man of the reflective type. His teaching and example should be a veritable treasure-trove to those who are professionally concerned to pull persons bogged in the slough of subjectivity out on to the hard ground of some solid objective reality. A modern psychiatrist has said that this is the main therapeutic problem with which his profession is now faced, how to get minds which are fixed in an inward-turned direction to face

outwards. In his desperation he clutches at any help, a dance, a game of bridge, a fishing trip—anything that will stop people from thinking solely of their own inner states.

There is even more to be said for Brother Lawrence's honest day's work in the kitchen as a cure for preoccupation with self. Yet having said this we must admit that there probably will always be some subjective natures who will need more or other help than is to be had from Brother Lawrence. He was the nearly perfect extravert, and the introvert knows perplexities, miseries, and compensations which the opposite type cannot understand. Clement of Alexandria and Brother Lawrence of Paris were both agreed that prayer and work ought to be, and may be, one and the same. Clement's solution of the antithesis was overfacile because he seems to have known too little about humanity's grimy, manual bread labor. Likewise Brother Lawrence's solution, salutary as it may be for those of us who need precisely the advice he gives, is too deceptively simple. Brother Lawrence was a Son of Martha, who had appropriated for Martha's duties the whole spirit of Mary. Perhaps that is what most men ought to do, and, if they are to be Christians, must do. Without persons of this type, as the writer of *Ecclesiasticus* has it, "cannot a city be inhabited. . . . They will maintain the state of the world." They are, indeed, in the great majority. But there will always be some minds "voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone," and if we may trust their testimony, they do not return from their meditative wanderings "with much dryness of spirit." To these voyagers Brother Lawrence has less to say.

I cannot resist the conclusion that the equation of prayer and work is not one which can be easily made by those who are aware in themselves of something like a balance between the inner life and the outer world, between contemplation and action. Persons who are predominantly of the one type or the other are able to make the equation because they have so little experience of the opposite pole. They do not really equate the two, they merely allow one to monopolize the other. Being thus constituted they are safe in so doing and suffer no spiritual or moral harm. But their particular happy endowment cannot always be turned to the account of those who are perhaps less happy, because for them the contrast between the world of thought and the world of action continues to be felt as a tension.

I am glad that there are men in the world like Brother Lawrence. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They redeem our religion from that half-reality which attends it when in the morning we go forth to our work and to our labor until the evening. Their little, frequent, unpremeditated acts of silent prayer are as possible in an office or a factory as in a monastery kitchen. They are our bulwark against the menacing flood of Satanism which threatens to engulf all our worldly affairs in bleak secularity, if not in positive evil. They reassure us that we are not shut out of religion, even though we cannot always go to church or do not even want to go to church. In a world in which man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow they vindicate the possibility of a spiritual conduct of that realistic task.

I know of few sentences in any biography, ancient or

modern, more wholesome than those with which Beaufort, the Cardinal's Grand Vicar, passes on to us the impression of "firmness of mind," "great common sense," "sagacity," and "dauntlessness" made upon him by Brother Lawrence. These qualities, he says,

warned him of those sunken rocks which one finds in the spiritual life, and on which so many souls make shipwreck, letting themselves drift along the current of curiosity and imagination, the love of novelty and human guidance.

Instead of watching his dispositions or stopping to test the way in which he walked, he fixed his gaze upon God alone, the Goal of his race, and *sped* along towards Him by daily acts of meekness and righteousness and love. He set himself to do, rather than to reflect on what to do.



## CHAPTER VI

*THE JOURNAL OF JOHN WOOLMAN*


*In our Journeying to and fro, we found some honest-hearted friends, who appeared to be concerned for the Cause of Truth among a backsliding people. We crossed from Virginia, over the river Patowmac, at Hoe's Ferry, and made a general visit to the meetings of Friends on the Western Shore of Maryland and were at their Quarterly meeting. . . . We had some hard Labour amongst them, Endeavouring to discharge our duty honestly as way opened in the Love of Truth, and thence taking sundry meetings on our way, we passed homeward, where, through the Favour of Divine Providence we reached y<sup>e</sup> 16. da 6. mo. 1746. And I may say that through the assistance of the Holy Spirit which mortifies selfish desires, my Companion and I traveled in harmony and parted in the nearness of True Brotherly Love. . . .*

*Two things were remarkable to me in this journey. First, in regard to my Entertainment. When I eat drank and lodged free-cost with people who lived in Ease on the hard toyl of their slaves I felt uneasie, and as my mind was inward to the Lord, I found, from place to place, this uneasiness return upon me at times through the whole visit. Where the masters bore a good share of the burthen, and lived frugally, so that their Servants were well provided for, and their labour moderate, I felt more easie; but where they lived in a costly way, and laid heavy burthens on their Slaves, my exercise was often great, and I frequently had conversation with them in private concerning it. Secondly, this trade of importing them from their native country being much Encouraged amongst them, and the white people and their children so generally liveing without much labour was frequently the subject of my serious thought, and I Saw in these Southern Provinces, so many Vices and Corruptions increased by this trade and this way of life, that it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the Land, and though now many willingly run to it, yet in the future the Consequence will be grievous to posterity. I express it as it hath appeared to me, not at once, nor twice, but as a matter fixed on my mind. THE JOURNAL OF JOHN WOOLMAN, CHAPTER II*

*(This quotation is from the text edited by Amelia Mott Gummere, 1922, and with following quotations is printed by permission of the publishers, The Macmillan Company, New York.)*

## Chapter vi

### THE JOURNAL OF JOHN WOOLMAN

 IN the course of his long life Wordsworth wrote three poems about the river Yarrow. They are called, successively, "Yarrow Unvisited," "Yarrow Visited," "Yarrow Revisited," and were separated by many years in time of composition.

The poet's instinct on his first tour of Scotland was not to go and see this little river of which he had heard so much and formed so vivid a picture. He preferred to cherish his own image of it rather than to run the risk of disappointment in presence of the fact.

*We . . . will not go,  
To-day, nor yet to-morrow,  
Enough if in our hearts we know  
There's such a place as Yarrow.*

*Be Yarrow stream unseen, unknown!  
It must, or we shall rue it:  
We have a vision of our own:  
Ah! why should we undo it?*

That was in 1803. Ten or twelve years later, in spite of his resolution to stay away, he found himself by Yarrow bank.

*And is this—Yarrow?—This the Stream  
Of which my fancy cherished,  
So faithfully, a waking dream?  
An image that hath perished!*

Eventually he made his peace with the reality and persuaded himself that he was the gainer by so doing.

## STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS

*I see—but not by sight alone,  
Loved Yarrow, have I won thee;  
A ray of fancy still survives—  
Her sunshine plays upon thee!*

*I know, where'er I go,  
Thy genuine image, Yarrow!  
Will dwell with me—to heighten joy,  
And cheer my mind in sorrow.*

In our previous chapters we have been dealing with five classics of Christian devotion written by men who lived long ago and far away. We always invest distant times and places with the glamour of fancy, therefore we cannot, and indeed we would not, expose these men and their books to a too harsh light of common day. Augustine stands in the sunset colors of the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome; on Saint Francis and Assisi there will always fall a glow that never was on land or sea; à Kempis and his *Imitation of Christ* are an irradiated pattern of Christian piety; the *Theologia Germanica* is the serene high noon of mediæval mysticism; and through the windows of the kitchen of that Carmelite monastery in Paris there shines upon Brother Lawrence the light that lighteth every man coming into the world. We guard these images in the mind jealously and try to protect them from the pitiless scrutiny of an unsympathetic criticism.

*We have a vision of our own:  
Ah! why should we undo it?*

Most of these men whom we have been considering lived in either the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages. The

obscurity which we impute to the former of those periods and the romance which we find in the latter enable us to cherish our own pious fancies from the past. But we cannot put off permanently the journey towards our own times, no matter what our fears in setting forth. Is the life of devotion, as we have been studying it thus far, a creation of our own imagination, imputed to the facts long after the event, or will it, in the end, shine just as brightly when we meet it nearer to our own day?

It is with this question in mind that I have chosen as the last of my themes the *Journal* of John Woolman, the Jersey Quaker of two hundred years ago. It is true that much water has flowed under the bridge since he lived, and that religious vernaculars have changed. But it is equally true that John Woolman belongs to our soil and is our own kind. The tale thus far has been told by men who stood within the Catholic Church; it is now taken up by one who stands at the extreme Protestant left. Can the vision of piety be renewed when we pass from the Old World to the New, from a world which was ancient to a world which is prophetically our modern world? Will this homespun member of the Society of Friends maintain the succession?

The contrast is instantly felt in the altered place names with which we have to deal. Carthage, Rome, Milan, Assisi, Perugia, Deventer, Mount Saint Agnes, Frankfurt, Paris—these are words with which to conjure. There is little magic in the place names which abound in John Woolman's *Journal*. True, he lived most of his life in a village called Mount Holly. But we had best not seek the mountain and hunt for the holly, or, as Wordsworth

said, "we shall rue it." It is further true that his journeys brought John Woolman across many old Indian names, and, as Robert Louis Stevenson once said, these names are the loveliest things in all America—Shenandoah, Manahockin, Susquehanna, Rappahannock. But the rising culture of the American colonies staked out its own claims in quite other terms: Goose Creek, Long Plain, Piney Woods, Third Haven, Freetown, Tarpaulin Cove. Luigi Salvatorelli, as we have seen, says that Umbria is "enwrapped and transfigured by a soft, ethereal light." What about "Raughway," New Jersey?

Not only was the scene of Woolman's life prosaic, there was also a realism in its concession to creaturely necessities which frankly parts company with the ideal of evangelical poverty celebrated by mediæval saints. The Little Poor Men of Assisi lived in booths or wattle huts and, as for possessions of their own, they had not where to lay their heads. Woolman as a young man already owned two hundred fertile acres with their decent farmhouse, and later he moved to a substantial house in town. His biographer indignantly "refutes" in his behalf the "charges of extreme poverty" which have been brought against him. Saint Francis, so the moving legend runs, received at La Verna at his latter end the Holy Stigmata, the marks of the Crucified, in his hands and his feet and his side. John Woolman carried to his grave the suppurating sores of smallpox.

You may go to the Library in Brussels and see there the autograph manuscripts copied by à Kempis at Mount Saint Agnes, a lovely handwork dedicated to unearthly things. You may go to the Historical Society of Pennsyl-

vania and see there John Woolman's Small Account Book, with its meticulous entries:

1743

ye 8 mo.

To makeing a Stomacher for Eliz. Matlack	£	s.	d.
	00	03	09
To makeing a Pair of Leather britches for Titus	00	02	00
To makeing a pair of Stays for Hannah Woolman	00	18	00

Or again, in the Larger Account Book:

1754

da mo

19 6

To Assisisting in Tracing the Lines & fix- ing Corners to the two parallels land sold Jos. Burr, & going to S. Crispes Concerning quit claim. . . . .	o	6	o
--	---	---	---

Such is the stuff from which we must refashion the pattern of saintliness: "a brown fustin cap for David Elwell"; "a pair of Bridle Reins for John Collins"; "Samuel Haine's coffin"; "the title of the land Samuel Smith proposed to buy."

The story is not unfamiliar. John Woolman came of Gloucestershire stock from England, which had been Quaker from earliest times. He was, however, the third generation on this soil, his grandfather having settled in West Jersey in 1678. The Woolman country lies some fifteen or twenty miles east of Philadelphia. There John Woolman was born in 1720, into a quiet farming community. He was a sensitive child, with quick imagination. He says of himself that "he had schooling pretty well for a planter," but the better part of his education was got in the solitude of long winter evenings. He con-

tracted in childhood and early youth the habit of wide and hard reading which made him an educated man beyond the custom of his kind.

Until he was twenty he helped his father on the farm, but in 1740, as he puts it, having "for a considerable time found my Mind less given to Husbandry than heretofore, having often in mind some other way of living," he moved to the near-by town of Mount Holly to become shop assistant to a merchant doing a general country store trade. The store did incidental tailoring and after a few years the young clerk decided to make this his calling. He was for perhaps ten years tailor and clerk-in-general to his fellow townsfolk. He made their breeches and gowns and stomachers. He surveyed their land, grafted their apple trees, drew up their title deeds and wills, made inventories of their property, wrote indentures for apprentices, went to court in his neighbors' behalf, and was executor of their estates. By the late 1760's he had turned schoolmaster and published his own "primer" for the use of children. Meanwhile he had married and moved back to the farm, to follow the calling which he concluded led to the best contentment in life. The picture we have is that of a man intelligent beyond the common level, competent in this world's affairs, and trusted with the interests of others as well as charged with responsibilities of his own.

Yet all this is but the creaturely setting of a life which was lived elsewhere and with other concerns. The mere business of earning a living and providing for a family was so efficiently dispatched that Woolman had wide margins of time and strength to go that extra mile for



which most men have so little energy. By the time he was twenty-one he had made his first appearance in the informal lay ministry of the Society of Friends, and it was to this ministry that he gave himself for the next thirty years, until his death in England in 1772.

His ministry carried him up and down the Atlantic Coast visiting Friends' meetings from Maine to South Carolina. It carried him inland across Pennsylvania to the debated borderland where the rival interests of English, French, and Indians came into collision. Finally it took him overseas. In three months of the year 1746, for example, he traveled fifteen hundred miles on horse and by foot. He may have been a wanderer by temperament, yet if so his native restlessness had been disciplined into a holy concern for the Christian religion. One increasing burden was laid more and more heavily upon his shoulders, the grievous fact and the mortal sin of human slavery. It was to the freeing of the slave that he gave the best of his time and thought and heart, and it is with the nascent cause of emancipation that we shall always identify him.

Before we turn to his historic part in this matter, and to the moral strategy of his ministry, we had best understand the man's tradition and character.

It is the distinction of the Society of Friends that it has never abandoned the attempt to reconcile the rightful claims of personal religion as an intimate, inward experience and the equally obligatory requirements of a genuinely social gospel. The mystic and the prophet, in religious history, tend to drift apart. The one withdraws from the affairs of the world, the other intrudes

himself into those affairs. As a result the mystical type of saint tends to lose his social conscience, while the social reformer tends in equal part to sacrifice the leverage of other-worldliness. The mystics grow sterile; the prophets become secularized. These individual traits may be often identified in churches which perpetuate the one type or the other. But Friends have always refused to accept this divorce and have struggled to compass the two aspects of the Christian life in a single Society. At this very day its silent meetings on the one hand and its patient work among share-croppers or unemployed coal miners on the other hand are the double face of a single shield.

If we wish to study this dual endeavor in the terms of a single character we can find no better exemplar than John Woolman, who was at once mystic and reformer. You will remember the Catholic Grand Vicar who spoke of the "singular sagacity" of Brother Lawrence. We find the same quality in Woolman, with this difference, that his sagacity had to express itself not within the sheltered walls of a monastery, but in the open places of common life. You could never call John Woolman a worldly man, yet he was not unworldly in the sense in which that word is so often used. There was in him no trace of the Oriental distrust of material things which we associate with some types of Christian asceticism. Woolman was, in this respect, essentially Anglo-Saxon and healthy-minded. He tells us unequivocally that "building houses suitable to dwell in, for ourselves and our Creatures, preparing Cloathing suitable to the Climate & Season, and food convenient, are all duties

incumbent on us. And under these general heads are many branches of business in which we may venture health and life as necessity may require." He was greatly distressed by the hard lot of sailors at sea; nevertheless, he could write, "I believe a communication from one part of the world to some other parts of it, by sea, is at times consonant with the will of our Heavenly Father; and to educate some youth in the practice of sailing, I believe may be right." This is, if you will, a prophetic interpretation of religion, but he was enough a mystic to be vividly aware of the peril of secularism which was implicit in any sanctions given to our common concerns, and all his permissive judgments were guarded by warnings and reservations.

Woolman required of himself what he constantly preached to others, the moral duty of keeping our superfluity of things down to the barest minimum. As a young man he gave up tending shop and turned to tailoring precisely because he thought that making clothes was a necessary trade, while clerking behind the counter of a country store involved one in the handling of too many unnecessary things. A modern department store would have been to him a spot of moral horror. He observed that vanity often led people beyond decent necessity. He carried on for years a little private vendetta against dyed cloth. He said that dyes ministered only to the pride of the eye, and what was more they rotted the fabric, which was better left to the natural colors of flax or wool. An undyed beaver hat made him for some time a conspicuous instance of his text, but this conspicuousness created in turn a whole new set of moral problems

and hampered his ministry, since it laid him open to the charge of "affecting singularity." Let him speak for himself on these matters, first with regard to his own shop and then with regard to other men's affairs:

Until the year 1756 I continued to retail goods, besides following my trade as a Taylor; about which time I grew uneasy on account of my business growing too cumbersome. I began with selling trimmings for garments, and from thence proceeded to sell cloaths and linens, and at length having got a considerable shop of goods, my trade increased every year, and the road to large business appeared open: but I felt a Stop in my mind. Through the mercies of the Almighty I had in a good degree learned to be content with a plain way of living . . . and, on serious reflection I believed Truth did not require me to engage much in cumbering affairs. . . . The increase of business became my burthen. . . . I then lessened my business and as I had opportunity told my customers of my intention that they might consider what shop to turn to. CH. III: 1756

When the time arrived for him to take ship for England he inspected the vessel in advance with a view to engaging passage. He came to the conclusion that the cabin was so overdecorated as to be not consonant with sound religion. His own words are interesting:

That on the outside of that part of the Ship where the cabbin was I observed sundry sorts of Carved work and Imagery; that in the Cabbin I observed some superfluity of workmanship of several sorts; and that according to the ways of men's reckoning, the sum of money to be paid for a passage in that Appartment has some relation to the expence of furnishing it to please the minds of such as give way to conformity to this world; and that in this, as in other cases, the moneys received from the

passengers are calculated to defray the cost of these superfluities, as well as the other expences of their passage. I therefore felt a scruple with regard to paying my money to defray such expences. CH. XI: 1772

He therefore took passage in what he calls the steerage,—we should call it the forecabin,—among the members of the crew.

It is frequently said to-day that Calvinism with its emphasis upon work and thrift is responsible for the evils of the modern capitalistic system, since under that system money-making and saving are construed as a religious right sanctioned by God, if not indeed a religious duty imposed by God. Whether this charge be warranted or not is, for the moment, beside the mark. In any case John Woolman stands clear of it. He might have been a rich and successful merchant, but he feared entanglement with things and deliberately turned his back on such a prospect for himself. He was willing, as he puts it, “to be content with real conveniences that were not costly,” and to live “a life free from much Entanglements, tho’ the income was small.”

Woolman’s moral fear of “superfluities” extended from the sober pursuits of life to its amusements. He was a serious lad and an even more serious man. He knew little about “that majestic indolence so dear to native man,” to say nothing of life’s “cakes and ale.” To Mount Holly there came one summer day a juggler and sleight-of-hand man, who proposed to give a show at the public house. It seems innocent enough to us, but not so to our hero. He went to the place and told the keeper that he had an inclination to spend the evening there. Seating

himself by the door, he labored with each prospective patron of the show to prove that spending money to see sleight-of-hand tricks wrought by a man who in that capacity was no service to the world was contrary to the nature of Christianity. One of his listeners quoted Bible texts in favor of the juggler; after Woolman had talked for an hour his conscience was clear and he went home. Presumably the show went on.

We habitually look to the Society of Friends for its hereditary witness against war. Woolman is not wanting in this respect, but happily for him his life fell in one of the less militaristic periods of American history. The only rumors of wars which invaded his peaceful world were those of the constant feuds between French and English, with the Indians as allies now of the one side and now of the other. There was, of course, the still unsolved problem of taxes which went to the support of armies and navies. Certain Friends whom he greatly respected did not feel called upon to withhold their taxes, in spite of the recognized destination of part of their payments, and for a while their example satisfied him. But he was never easy about the matter and seems at times to have been in default as a taxpayer, suffering consequent "distress of Goods." He got the matter discussed among Friends more freely than had been the prior custom, since "scrupling to pay a tax on account of the application hath seldom been heard of heretofore, even amongst the men of Integrity, who have Steadily borne their testimony against outward wars in their time." Upon this whole matter he had a constant "exercise of

Conscience," even though he never had to face the issue in its most acute form.

The problem came closest home to him when, together with the rest of the Colony, the little town of Mount Holly was subjected to a draft intended to raise troops to go to the relief of Fort William Henry, which was being hard pressed by the French. Some of the citizens of the town suddenly developed a conscientious objection to war of which they had not previously been conscious. Some went away until the emergency was past. Others "appeared to have a real tender scruple in their minds against joining in wars, and were much humbled under the apprehension of Tryal so near." The recruiting officers seem to have been patient and sympathetic men, and Woolman with characteristic generosity of imagination saw their difficulties quite as clearly as he saw his own. They heard the case of scrupulous Quakers and did not press the issue. Meanwhile the French took the Fort and went back to Canada, while the drafted men were returned to their homes and discharged. Incidentally a hundred soldiers had been quartered on Mount Holly and Woolman had been ordered to provide board and lodging for two. He felt that it was difficult for him to entertain men who were under pay as soldiers, but finally decided to take them in free of charge, refusing the six shillings a week allowed for their keep. Only one turned up and that one behaved himself "very civilly." When the officer came to make payment Woolman refused it, and the entry concludes with the observation, "He said he was obliged to me, to which I said nothing!"

We are dealing, then, with a man for whom religion, the Christian religion in particular, expresses itself most authentically in the terms of conscience. John Woolman was not insensible to the loveliness of the world, particularly to the beauty of nature; nor was he indifferent to the quest for truth, since he had a restless and wide-ranging mind. But God manifested himself most clearly and was served most faithfully in the terms of righteousness and mercy.

There was in Woolman a kind of cosmic sympathy for suffering. He felt everywhere and at all times the needless pain of the world. As a very little boy he had thrown a stone at a nesting robin and had killed her. At first he was pleased with his skill, but a moment later was horrified at his cruelty. Logical in this as in all the rest of his life, he climbed the tree where the nest was and killed the fledglings as well, thinking they were better quickly dead than starving slowly to death, thus fulfilling, as he says, the saying of the Bible that "the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." Once was enough, and his recoil from that wanton prank identified him forever after with the unnecessary sufferings of animals. There is no record of the miles he walked to save some tired or galled horse, but they must have been many. He was so shocked by the cruelty meted out to coach horses in England that for weeks on end he refused to send letters by the posts.

Not only so, but human beings in misery and distress woke his instant sympathy. The *Journal* has much to say of the sufferings of sailors. One has the feeling that Woolman was a landlubber who could not understand that there may be a profound exhilaration in going on deck for



watch at night in the midst of a storm. He could feel only the darkness and the cold and the harsh taste of the salt on his lips. But the fore-castle of a ship has never been a bed of roses, and John Woolman is one of the first who wrought for its reformation. He doubted whether boys ought to be encouraged to go to sea, but he knew that if they had to go it should be under conditions other than those on the ship which took him to England.

A modern writer has spoken of the "interfering spirit of righteousness" which appears in all prophetic religions. Woolman was no stranger to that spirit; it was indeed his daily bread from heaven. Yet, uninterpreted, the term is wholly false to the elusive genius of his ministry. Most prophets thoroughly enjoy interfering with other people. If, in the process, they can accrue to themselves some portion of the martyr complex their joy is still greater. Woolman had nothing of those tempers in him. Again and again he makes record of his shrinking from being different or singular, and still further of his reluctance to seem, even by the inference of his own conduct, to criticize the ways of others, particularly the ways of his fellow Quakers. "Offending sober people," he said, "is a disagreeable task to me. . . . To put them in trouble on account of Scruples of Conscience is a painful task."

The Society of Friends is, in its trust in the Inner Light, by far the most fully Protestant body in Christendom. The authority inherent in the standards and practices of the Society, and exercised upon those born into it, must be very great. To go against "the sense of the meeting" must require great courage or great rashness.

There can be few religious bodies in which the pressure of corporate conviction operates as strongly. Nevertheless having cast its spiritual lot with the Inner Light, rather than with ecclesiastical principalities and powers, there are in the Society of Friends a patience, a candor, and a tolerance in the presence of the varieties of the Christian conscience which the authoritarian type of church lacks. The sensitive Quaker has no desire to deny to a fellow member that principle of private freedom which is his own most precious birthright. You must often have felt in the Quaker what you may not have taken the trouble to analyze, a peculiar unwillingness to exercise anything like moral coercion upon others. All these traits are apparent in John Woolman. His *Journal*, from its first page to its last, is lighted by what one can only call a delicacy of moral perception and moral precept which is altogether lovely. He understood, as few men have understood, how complex the problems of conscience are and what a sensitive instrument the human conscience is. This whole side of his character was matured in the terms of his slowly clarified position upon the matter of human slavery.

It is hard to say when and where the social conscience, as we know it to-day, was born. It has always been implicit in Christianity, but it has become explicit, in its present form, only in more recent centuries. It takes the form with us, when we are at our best, of a sense of individual identification with human suffering in something like its racial totality and of individual guilt for the forms of that suffering. This idea has become almost a platitude to-day; so much so that it has lost something

of its first powerful appeal. But in John Woolman we can see the idea taking shape in one man's mind and working upon him as a powerful ferment. The compassion which he felt for suffering animals, for sailors at sea, for drenched post boys on English coach horses, for dispossessed Indians in the American colonies, he felt with double weight for the negro slave.

If I were asked to date the birth of the social conscience in its present-day form, I think I should put it on the twenty-sixth day of the eighth month of the year 1772. The entry in Woolman's *Journal* is as follows:

In a time of Sickness with the pleurisie, a little upward of two and a half years ago I was brought so Near the gates of death, that I forgot my name. Being then desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy collour, between the South and the East, and was informed that this mass was human beings, in as great misery as they could be, & live, and that I was mixed in with them, & henceforth I might not consider myself as a distinct or Separate being. CH. XII: 1772 5

One cannot doubt the human stuff and occasion for this "mass of matter of a dull gloomy collour, between the South and the East"; it was negro slavery.

We first see this dull mass coming over the horizon of Woolman's world as a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. In 1743, while he was clerking in the general store at Mount Holly, his employer sold a black woman and asked Woolman to write the bill of sale for the buyer. It was a routine matter of everyday conveyancing. Woolman's entry in the *Journal* is explicit:

The thing was Sudden, and though the thoughts of

writing an Instrument of Slavery for one of my fellow creatures felt uneasy, yet I remembered I was hired by the year; that it was my master who [directed] me to do it, and that it was an elderly member of our society who bought her, so through weakness I gave way and wrote it, but at the Executing it I was so Afflicted in my mind, that I said before my Master and the friend, that I believed Slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian Religion: this in some degree abated my uneasiness, yet as often as I reflected seriously upon it I thought I should have been clearer, if I had desired to be Excused from it, as a thing against my conscience, for such it was. [And] some time after this a young man of our Society, spake to me to write [an instrument of slavery], he having lately taken a Negro into his house. I told him I was not easie to write it, for though many [people] kept slaves in our society as in others, I still believed the practice was not right, and desired to be excused from doing the writing. I spoke to him in good will, and he told me, that keeping slaves was not altogether agreeable to his mind, but that the slave being a gift made unto his wife, he had accepted of her from some of her friends, and so we parted. CH. I: 1743

From this day of tentative small things came the greatest single influence which issued a century and a quarter later in the Emancipation Proclamation. No other one man in the eighteenth century began to have the influence, as an abolitionist, which Woolman had.

His subsequent journeys as visitant Friend and lay preacher into the Southern states confirmed his original convictions. He was "baptized into a feeling sense of the conditions of the people." To put it on no other grounds, he was not easy about the hospitality which he received on slave plantations. Sometimes he paid board to his

hosts with the request that they should give the money to the most needy of their slaves, at other times he made a gift direct to the slaves themselves.

When I eat and drank and lodged free cost with people who lived in Ease on the hard toyl of their slaves, I felt uneasie, and as my mind was inward to the Lord, I found from place to place, this uneasiness return upon me at times through the whole visit. Where the masters bore a good share of the burthen, and lived frugally, so that their servants were well provided for, and their labor moderate, I felt more easie; but where they lived in a costlie way, and laid heavy burthens on their Slaves, my exercise was often great, and I frequently had conversation with them in private concerning it. CH. II: 1746

At this point in the *Journal* Woolman enters one of his best-known sayings about the menace of slavery to the America of the future. It is the kind of dispassionate observation which we associate with Old Testament prophecy—wholly wanting in malice, yet inspired by a deep feeling for the operations of a moral universe.

I Saw in these Southern Provinces, so many Vices and Corruptions increased by this trade and this way of life, that it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the Land, and though now many willingly run into it, yet in the future the Consequence will be grievous to posterity. CH. II: 1746

By this time, he goes on to say, his conviction as to the evil of slavery ceased to be an occasional uneasiness or mental "stop," and had become the fixed manner of his mind. He had no hasty Utopian hopes: "deep rooted customs though wrong are not easily altered, but it is the duty of every man to be firm in that which he cer-

tainly knows is right for him." If Woolman could not do more, he could do no other and no less.

His quiet, unyielding practice was not without its modest but none the less concrete effects. An aged Quaker asked him in 1756 to write a will in which, among his other possessions, he devised his slaves to his son. Woolman refused and stated his reasons. The old man went away, saying that he would find someone else to draw the document, but after a few days he came back saying that he had now freed all his slaves and Woolman might write a will in which they should not appear.

His inflexible testimony brought him naturally into discussions with apologists for slavery. He had to hear the threadbare argument that negroes were the offspring of Cain and their servitude a perennial punishment for the murder of Abel. He had his Biblical answer ready; presumably the Family of Cain was wholly destroyed at the time of the Flood, but if, as some asserted, Ham went into the land of Nod and married a wife of the stock of Cain who had escaped the Flood, even then the Bible said "the son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father." The truth was that the reasons offered Woolman in favor of slavery, Biblical and non-Biblical alike, were bad reasons and he did not hesitate to say so. The real motive for keeping slaves was "the love of ease and gain." "I believe," he continues, "that liberty is their right. . . . I believe He who is a Refuge for ye Opres'd, will in his own time plead their cause, and happy it will be for Such who walk in uprightness before him." By 1758 he had reached much the position at which Lincoln arrived a century later and his words anticipate

the dispassionate majesty of the Second Inaugural:

My mind is often led to consider the purity of the Divine Being, and the Justice of his Judgments and herein my Soul is covered with awfullness. I cannot omit to hint of some cases, where people have not treated them with the purity of justice, and the event hath been lamentable. Many Slaves on this Continent are oppressed, and their cries have reached the ears of the Most High! Such are the purity and certainty of his judgments, that he cannot be partial [toward any]. In infinite love and goodness he hath opened our understandings from time to [time respecting] our duty toward this people, and it is not a time for delay. Should we now be sensible of what he requires of us, and through a respect to the outward interest of some persons, or through a regard to some friendships which do not stand on the immutable foundation, neglect to do our duty in firmness & constancy, still waiting for some extraordinary means to bring about their freedom, it may be that by *Terrible things in Righteousness*, God may answer us in this matter. CH. V: 1758

These words were spoken at the Yearly Meeting in Philadelphia and subsequently entered in the *Journal*. At that meeting Woolman had found many supporters who were willing openly to say "that they believed Liberty was the Negroes' right," and to their witness no public opposition was made.

From then on we find Woolman ceaselessly testifying to what had become his controlling concern. And yet he was keenly aware of the risks of self-display to which the prophet is liable. There were the dangers of "selfish views or party spirit" as well as of those subtler perils of vanity and self-deception to which men who feel deeply

are open. He always tried to speak briefly; the spirit of the prophet in him was subject to the prophet he actually was. Thus, we meet him on the way home from one Quarterly Meeting, which must have been needlessly garrulous, calculating that, if a speaker detains three hundred people for one unnecessary minute, that is as though he had unjustly imprisoned one man for five hours!

Woolman's private path, once he had embarked upon his mission, was by no means easy. It was his aim "to Stand clear from oppressing his fellow-creatures." What he did and what he left undone were alike prompted by that steady purpose. Yet the endeavor involved him in many an awkward dilemma, and his solution of an occasional concrete difficulty sometimes seems to border on sophistication. For example, before he had become deeply troubled about the lot of the slave, he had shared with another man in a transaction which plagued him in retrospect. The law in Jersey bound a master to support any negroes whom he freed, in case they became destitute. Therefore certain Quakers had adopted a compromise arrangement by which a slave was bound over in a kind of unpaid apprenticeship until he was thirty, when he should be set free. Looking back on a document he had helped to write, by which a young negro had thus been indentured for thirty years, Woolman felt that the black man should be entitled to wages for the nine years after he was twenty-one. But since two men had drawn up the document Woolman did not regard himself as solely guilty or solely chargeable. He therefore pledged himself or his executors to give the negro, when



his term of service should have ended, four and a half years' wages. You may call this *casuistry* if you will; it is, I think, more properly called a scrupulous conscience.

His journeys took him to Quaker meetings all up and down the Eastern coast of America from Maine to the Carolinas for a period of twenty years. They might have taken him to the West Indies, but he was not easy to avail himself of the low passage money made possible by the slave labor on which the West Indian trade of rum, sugar, and molasses rested. He found his more difficult problems in those meetings, usually in the North rather than the South, where the slave trade was financed and the shipping organized. In these matters it is always the absentee landlord who is the most difficult to convince and convert. He sees the profits of the business, he does not have to face its human costs and penalties. Woolman wrote, and spoke, and prayed, and was silent. He spread throughout the entire Society of Friends in the eighteenth century what Professor Whitehead has called "the infection of an uneasy conscience." That, rather than any political advice or economic strategy, is the contribution which religion at its characteristic best will always make to the solution of any vexed social problem.

The trip to England was undertaken to press the cause of the negro upon the conscience of Quakers in the old country. His journey, as we have seen, had its hardships, since he chose to travel steerage rather than cabin. It is a relief to know that, then as now, cabin passengers were able to invite their friends from below decks to visit them, and that in spite of his initial choice of quarters with the sailors, Woolman passed much of his time

with his fellow travelers. A few crates of chickens carried on deck for food suffered sadly in transit. Fourteen of the creatures were drowned, but when one indomitable rooster began to crow, as odors of the land came from the Lizard, Woolman was heartened to charge us that we "do not lessen that Sweetness of life in the animal Creation, which the great Creator intends for them under our government." He also observed—in entire consonance with his shrewd common sense—that another time it would be "more agreeable to the pure wisdom" to carry fewer chickens, since they were not all eaten on the voyage!

Woolman was disheartened, though not discouraged, by what he found in England. After the meagreness of life in the American colonies, England seemed cumbered with "superfluities" and riddled with ancient injustices. A silent stranger in a strange land, he "passed through some painful labour" and knew more than one "time of inward poverty." Impelled by his catholic sympathies, he began at once to inquire into the condition of agricultural and industrial laborers and was sobered by what he found, women spinning in factories for fourpence and fivepence a day. The Quakers, alas, were hopelessly involved in shipping and therefore in the iniquities of the slave trade. In the face of all this he felt an increased need that "friends may dig deep, may carefully cast forth the loose matter, and get down to the Rock." It was while he was in Westmorland, with the misery of sailors, post boys, farm laborers, mill hands, and God's dumb creatures added to the familiar burden of slavery, that he had his vision of that "mass of matter of a dull

gloomy collour" with which he was forever mixed. As the vision passed he heard a soft melodious voice which he thought was an angel speaking to other angels, and saying, "*John Woolman is dead.*" The words and the entry in his *Journal* anticipated the fact by only two months; that which he greatly feared all his lifetime, the dread smallpox, overtook him, and he died at York, tenderly cared for by sympathetic Friends, on the "7th day of the 10th mo., 1772." You may see his stone under the wall of the Friends Old Burial Ground, Bishophill, York.

By the end of the eighteenth century slaveholding had ceased among Quakers. The New England Yearly Meeting for 1782 could report no slaves known to be held in the Meeting. By 1784 only one slave was known to be left in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. It would be too much to say that John Woolman single-handed had wrought this change. Yet, during the formative and decisive years, he more than any other was the articulate voice of the uneasy conscience of the Society of Friends, and his witness gave direction to their action. Nor should we underestimate his wider and longer influence. He is known to have wrought powerfully on the minds of Brissot the French Girondist, and of Thomas Clarkson the English antislavery agitator. In our own land, William Lloyd Garrison was enlisted in the cause by a disciple of Woolman's. There were apparently no limits to the silent changes wrought in men's minds and hearts by the effort of this single sensitive spirit to clear himself of all complicity in the unnecessary suffering which greedy and lazy societies had imposed upon the negro.

The true drama of Woolman's life is, of course, the

inner drama—the subtle history of a tender conscience. In some ways there is no historical drama to match this. Great outward acts seem by contrast clumsy and crude. Other men might be content to work with what Woolman calls “loose matter”; he must “get down to the Rock.”

If we have come anywhere within range of the truth of this man, you must have realized how unlike the conventional reformer John Woolman was. The unwillingness to blame even those of whose conduct he could not approve, the determination not to be drawn into hasty words of which he would repent or betrayed into tedious words which had become mechanical formulas, the resolution that his concern must be new every morning with something of its first freshness, the refusal to force the pace of events beyond present possibility, the historical patience which was content to bide God’s time—from all these traits the modern advocate of the social gospel has much to learn. Here was a good man who was also wise, a daring idealist who was also a matter-of-fact realist, a man in whom two worlds were met. Whittier says of his spoken words and his brief tracts that “to the slaveholders of his time they must have seemed like the voice of conscience speaking to them in the cool of the day. One feels, in reading them, the tenderness and humility of a nature redeemed from all pride of opinion and self-righteousness, sinking itself out of sight, and intent only upon rendering smaller the sum of human sorrow and sin by drawing men nearer to God and to each other.”

Woolman lived at a time and in a religious society in

which good men did not always agree. He realized that conscience is variable, that in any given instance its utterances are arbitrary, and that it is therefore educable. His *Journal* is above all else a study in that inward discipline by which conscience is matured. His problems still remain, in changed forms, our problems. We, too, are aware of human beings in our world "in as great misery as they could be, & live." Statecraft and prudential counsels may encourage us to dissociate ourselves from this dull "mass of matter," and to know ourselves as "distinct and separate beings." But religion will always carry us beyond the boundaries within which prudent counsels would seclude us. We, too, live in times when the clouds have returned after the rain, and there is "dark gloominess hanging over the land." It may steady us to find that under lowering skies life is not merely tolerable but may be even serene. For our own reassurance in this latest day we do well to turn back to the *Journal* of this Jersey Quaker, for an entry made in 1772: "I have gone forward, not as one travelling in a road cast up, and well prepared, but as a man walking through a miry place, in which are stones here and there, safe to step on: but so situated that one step being taken, time is necessary to see where to step next." "Getting down to the Rock"—and the phrase is Woolman's—becomes in practice a matter of finding steppingstones for conscience.



## SUGGESTED TEXTS AND EDITIONS

(*Note.* In the following lists, the publisher's name appears first. An asterisk indicates that the text is accompanied by an introduction.)

### I. THE CONFESSIONS OF ST. AUGUSTINE (354-430)

\*Dutton. Everyman's Library. Translated by E. B. Pusey. \$.90.

Hale. With 8 plates in color. \$1.00.

\*Harvard University Press. 2 vols. Latin and English. Translated by William Watts. \$5.00.

### II. THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS (1182-1226)

U. S. Library Association. \$.25.

\*Dutton. Everyman's Library. With Life of Saint Francis and the Mirror of Perfection. \$.90.

Hale. With 8 plates in color. \$1.00.

### III. IMITATION OF CHRIST BY THOMAS À KEMPIS (1380-1471)

\*Methuen. Translated by Charles Bigg. 3s.

Longmans. \$.50-\$1.25.

\*Dutton. Everyman's Library. \$.90.

\*Hale. With 8 plates in color. \$1.00.

### IV. THEOLOGIA GERMANICA (probably *circ.* 1350)

\*Macmillan. Translated by S. Winkworth. \$1.40.

### V. THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD BY BROTHER LAWRENCE (N. HERMAN, 1611-1691)

Editions published by: Revell (\$.15), Morehouse (\$.40), American Baptist (\$.40).

\*Benziger. Translated by Donald Attwater. \$1.00.

### VI. JOURNAL OF JOHN WOOLMAN (1720-1772)

\*Dutton. Everyman's Library (lacks 10th ch.). \$.90.

\*Macmillan. Edited by Amelia Mott Gummere. \$5.00.  
(The definitive edition of Woolman.)















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